Rodney Milnes reviews the Weill–Lenya Correspondence

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the publisher’s official viewpoint. The editor encourages the
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in future issues. The submission deadline for the next issue is
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Cover photos: Wedding photo of Weill and Lenya,
Berlin 1926; “View of the Concert Hall [Vienna],”
watercolor by E.F. Hofecker, 1913.
To the editor

Responses to Andrew Porter’s review of Mahagonny at the English National Opera:

I too was disappointed by the English National Opera production of Mahagonny last June, but in ways different from those remarked upon by Andrew Porter in his review [vol. 13, no. 2, p. 23]. Sixteen years ago in the Methuen edition of the Brecht/Auden text, I published (as you have done in your Fall 1995 issue) the Notes which Weill wrote before the Leipzig premiere, following them with “Suggestions for the stage realization” by himself and Neher which his Foreword was meant to introduce. Caspar Neher’s projections, which Weill described as a Bestandteil of the performance material to be sent to any prospective producers, were shown in the Arts Council of Great Britain’s Neher exhibition in 1986. The one with the bomber planes, which you illustrate, was reproduced in our catalogue then.

I blame the ENO for not realizing from the start that all this, like the need to minimize the actors’ gestures and props (Requisiten does not mean “requirements”) was part of the effort to create “fundamental forms of a new, simple, popular musical theater” (Weill to Heinseheimer on 14 October 1929). I am surprised that Andrew Porter, in his wholesale Verriß, makes no complaint about the company’s failure to dig up the Neher slides or to aim—even in a theater the size of the Coliseum—at “an almost concertante” musical performance. Nor does he complain of the Americanization of the setting, which Weill himself wanted to avoid. This was expressed in names, accents, but above all in the Feingold translation. All these are basic errors of understanding and judgment, which threw the whole production off course and now make Porter’s criticisms seem quite secondary.

If anybody wants some indication of how the Theater am Kurfürstendamm tackled the work at the end of 1931, Neher’s Regiebuch is in the Vienna National Library; unfortunately I understood its importance too late for inclusion in the exhibition of 1986.

JOHN WILLETT
Thil-Manneville
30 November 1995

I object to Andrew Porter’s opinions on Sian Edwards’s conducting of Mahagonny at English National Opera. But then, being her husband, I would, wouldn’t I? Anyone else interested in the matter can listen to a recording of the BBC broadcast, preferably compare it with a recording of the performance from the Met on 9 December, and then decide for herself whether Porter’s adoption of the mode of disillusioned old creep was authentic or not. At least he spared us a rerun of his “analysis”; and at least the ENO performance will, presumably, have cured him of the “feeling of joy in men’s and women’s goodness” the opera induced in his person heretofore.

Enough of that. When it comes to the musical text of Mahagonny, Porter’s opinions have the merit of mentioning the problem. They prompt my second reason for writing. Performers need a composition history of the opera: when, why, and in what circumstances did Weill write what he wrote? David Drew’s crucial research of course answers most of this; but it has not been published under one cover and doubtless there is now more to add by both himself and others. What’s needed is a list of the facts, such as they are, and a list of the unanswered questions. Are you able to bring this about?

IAN KEMP
London
11 December 1995

The English National Opera announced the resignation of Sian Edwards as music director on 6 November. Paul Daniel of Opera North has been named as her successor.

Sorting out the problems of Mahagonny is a task that requires travel to various archives and a concentrated period of study. As such, it is the perfect topic for a doctoral dissertation. Similar studies on Lady in the Dark and Street Scene have proven invaluable in determining viable performing versions. Anyone interested in undertaking this study should contact the Kurt Weill Foundation to inquire about financial assistance through the Grants Program.

A New Look

After thirteen years of using the same design elements, we decided it was time to give the Kurt Weill Newsletter a fresher look. The editorial policy and writing style remain the same. The overall content is also unchanged, but organized differently. Feature articles and reviews form the main body of the newsletter, pages 1-24. News, press clippings, and a calendar of events are now in a new, 8-page “pull-out” supplement bound into the center fold. The format of this section will be refined over the next several issues.

We welcome your comments.
Weill in Vienna

Norbert Gingold Remembers

Die Dreigroschenoper

Immediately following the phenomenal success of Die Dreigroschenoper in early September 1928, Weill's publisher was suddenly faced with a great demand for performance materials. Universal Edition responded by hiring twenty-seven-year-old conductor and composer Norbert Gingold to prepare the piano-vocal score. That job led to his engagement in the next year to conduct the Viennese premiere of Die Dreigroschenoper at the Raimund Theater in a production starring Harald Paulsen as Macheath. At about the same time he also prepared the piano-vocal score for Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny. The following text is freely edited by David Farneth from an oral history interview he conducted with Gingold at his San Francisco home on 12 April 1985.

Did you see the Berlin production of Die Dreigroschenoper before you were asked to make the piano reduction for Universal Edition?

No. Believe it or not, I never saw the production in Berlin. Universal Edition gave me the orchestra score right after it opened at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm and asked me to make a piano-vocal score—the Klavierauszug. They were in an awful hurry, and I had only a few days to do it. UE printed it immediately and then sent it off to Berlin.

So you never saw Weill's manuscript piano score?

No, just the orchestra score. When I found little mistakes here and there I would immediately write him little notes, asking for clarification. He answered my questions very quickly, because neither of us wanted mistakes, in spite of the rush.

Were there many cuts or changes marked into Weill's manuscript full score?

No, it was quite clean and clear and with few changes and erasures. Maybe he had copied it from an earlier score, I don't know.

Were the orchestra parts used in Berlin handwritten or engraved?

At first they were handwritten, then UE had them engraved and printed. Luckily it was a small orchestra, so UE could hire someone to copy the parts in a day if they were needed by another theater. And of course pretty soon the Berlin orchestra didn't even need parts; they could play it from memory.

Let's move to Vienna. How did you get the job conducting Die Dreigroschenoper at the Raimund Theater?

This is now the spring of 1929. Someone from the theater asked either Kalmus or Hertzka at UE (I'm not sure which) if he knew anyone who could do it. He recommended me saying, “Gingold’s a composer, and he can play the piano part too.” I was young at the time—only 27—and so many people were envious, not only because of the money, but because of the exposure too. I can't tell you how many times my picture was in the paper.

When did you first meet Weill?

He came to Vienna when we were preparing the orchestra. This was my first time to meet him personally, after we had exchanged letters. He told me he was pleased with the Klavierauszug and asked me to play something. I said to him that he should play to show me the tempi. “Oh no,” he said, “you play much better.” He didn’t want to play a single note, but he seemed happy with the rehearsals.

How long did you rehearse before the production opened?

About six weeks or so. The orchestra had to play it almost by memory in order to do it well. It was necessary. Every morning we had a rehearsal.

Did the orchestra play the score note-perfect, or did they improvise?

No, I wouldn't say they improvised. But they played the jazzy numbers a bit freely, you know, not in strict, exact rhythm. That was the jazzy part of it. It wouldn’t be right to play it “correctly.” And if a player’s mood changed, he might play it a little differently from night to night. But the notes were the same, of course.

Was it common for musicians to double on other instruments in the way Weill calls for in the score?

No. Some of the wind people played in orchestras, where they had to play the clarinet. Then they switched to the band and had to learn to play saxophone—soprano, tenor, alto—they learned all those instruments and could play them. It was hard to find string players who could play wind instruments, though. We got a very nice group together, and they all played beautifully. We had two trumpets and one trombone. I don’t think our trombonist doubled on anything. Neither did the trumpets. But for other instruments we had all kinds of combinations—it worked out fine.

What do you remember about Harald Paulsen playing Macheath?

Paulsen. Oh, he was famous. Paulsen brought wonderful character and temperament to the part. He also had lots of energy! When he was in the Old Bailey prison cell—a high cage—singing “Ballade vom angenehmen Leben,” stage director Karlheinz Martin had him jump up and down on the mattress a few times and then fly over the top! The audience loved it. Oh, he was an acrobatic Tänzer—everything you could ask for. But then I found out the sad side of how he could do it. I walked into his dressing room one day, and he suddenly turned his back saying “just one moment” as he was putting some “energy” into his body. Lots of people took drugs in those days.
I also remember that he wanted a little bit of the “Moritat” inserted in the second act, so I played it for him on the piano. When Weill came I asked him if we couldn’t orchestrate it, because the musicians were just sitting there anyway. He said, “Okay, very good.” But Paulsen got furious when he heard the orchestra playing it, because no one had warned him in advance. He shouted, “I thought I was in the wrong musical—I didn’t recognize it—I expected piano—why didn’t you tell me?” The surprise sent him off for more heroin, or whatever it was he was taking. Of course he got his way, and we went back to using just piano.

That touches an interesting topic. How open was Weill to making changes in the piece to accommodate a particular actor?

He was always very soft-spoken, and I remember him being flexible, especially one time when Paulsen wanted a tempo a little slower. Weill said, “Okay. Do it as he wants it.” [See accompanying press article.] Weill was very easy to get along with. Very easy. If there ever was a problem, he would talk with me about it calmly. For him it was important that the performance be a success. He enjoyed that so much. Also, he was always anxious to talk to reporters or to radio people.

Can you remember anything special about the other cast members?

First of all, most of the actors came from Berlin. Only a few were Viennese. They were all very well suited to their parts—all first class. I auditioned the people from Vienna, and I knew what every role required. When somebody came with just a beautiful bel canto singing voice I said, “We’ll call you.” Every word had to be understood, and the typical opera singer is not easily understood. If you don’t know the language, you never know what they’re singing.

Let me ask you the age-old question about actors who sing versus singers who act. How did Weill feel about the presentation of the songs? Did he really want them sung well by real singers or was he content with actors that sort-of sing?

Neither. We looked for people who could sing and act. We cast predominately actors who could sing well, but they were not principally singers. None of them would have been hired to sing grand opera.

But they could sing all the notes, in the ranges written?

Oh yes, the music was sung correctly, but with the voices of actors. The song can’t be “talked”; the melody should be there. But it can’t be a trained bel canto voice from the opera. It would hurt the whole production. To hear a beautiful voice—that’s not it.

How was the orchestra set up on the stage?

We were at the back of the stage behind a transparent scrim. I faced the audience, and the musicians faced me, mostly with their backs to the audience. I couldn’t really see the audience because the house was dark. I conducted and played the harmonium. We had a pianist too.

Wasn’t there a problem with the sound, with the musicians facing backstage?

The sound was very much muffled, of course. It was always like background music. The overture, for instance, sounded like it came from far away. That’s how Weill wanted it to look, like an improvised play for poor people by poor people. It was sophisticated and simplified at the same time.

How did you do the “Moritat”?

We used a grind organ. The actor starting turning the cylinder and singing immediately after the overture. It was very realistic having the sound not coming from the orchestra. I had taken the music to a local grind organ maker, and he punched the cylinder.

Do you know if that cylinder was used for any other productions?

No, just for the Raimund Theater in Vienna. The director paid for it, and they kept it. I don’t know what they did with it. Weill liked the grind organ. I don’t know why they wanted to take it out in Berlin.

Did you make any cuts in the score?

The only one I remember while looking through this copy of the vocal score is “Salomon-Song.” I don’t know why it was cut; we just never did it. Other than that there were only very small changes. That always happens.

Neither the piano-vocal score nor the published full score contains any Entr’acte or scene-change music. Do you remember there being any?

No, not a single piece, except for the bit of “Moritat” in the second act I talked about before. Nothing else would really fit in. It’s a special style. And there was no exit music or music for curtain calls either.

How long did Die Dreigroschenoper run in Vienna?

It ran over 100 performances, which is about three months. Maybe it was four months or so. It was not like in Berlin, and I can explain why. The style, subject, and everything else was better suited to a Berlin audience. The Viennese are a little more conservative. They don’t like seeing half-naked girls on stage. Some said, “Oh pfui” and left before the end. But it was a hit, anyway. In Berlin it played for years and practically the whole city saw it. Not so in Vienna.

What did you know about Weill’s politics then?

Some people were shocked by the subject matter of Die Dreigroschenoper, but I must say that Weill was not in even the slightest way a communist. He liked Brecht’s work because it inspired him to write music. Just like today I might decide to write music to some Hindu psalm or to praise Allah or whatever. Why not—it’s poetry at the same time. That’s how he considered it. He was not at all for communist ideas, not at all. And they probably never argued about that. They were very happy to have each other. Weill liked Brecht’s poetry. “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral” and so forth. It was not his opinion, but it was interesting to show those people who believe in it. And that’s why he did it. Mahagonny
is the same way. I don’t think he agreed with the kind of life shown in Mahagonny. But he was a musician, not a politician.

Let’s talk about your work on the vocal score of Mahagonny. I assume that you got the full score from Universal Edition, just like with Dreigroschenoper?
Yes, but Mahagonny was obviously for a large orchestra and a considerably tougher job than Dreigroschenoper. Much more of the score had to be left out of the reduction so that it could be played on the piano. I tried to put in enough cues to show something of what was happening in the orchestra.

Did UE have your vocal score engraved as soon as it was finished?
Oh yes, they even wanted parts of it before the whole thing was finished. It went right to the engraver. And UE was not happy with the expense! They were much more pleased with the small score of Dreigroschenoper, which brought in millions of dollars. Mahagonny would never be the same sort of success.

After the success of Die Dreigroschenoper, the director of UE cautioned Weill against becoming too popular, against compromising his art for this sort of lighter fare. Did you get any sense of this attitude from the UE people that you knew?
Not that I remember. Of course Mahagonny is different from Threepenny in that it concentrates more on singing. For me that waters it down. The Singspiel version, which I never saw, must be as effective as Threepenny, but making an all-composed, all-sung opera out of it is not the right idea. It was not a grand opera nor was it a Singspiel anymore—it was in between the two.

So don’t you think that Mahagonny works as a grand opera?
It was forced into the format of a grand opera. Many passages sound beautiful, like they were composed for grand opera. And then comes a musical number like “Moon of Alabama” and so forth. If that was heard separate—like in Threepenny—it would gain a lot. Of course, the dialogue in Threepenny is too realistic to be sung.

Do you think he was trying to come back to more “serious,” more acceptable forms?
What he wrote later in America was much more serious than Mahagonny. Take Lady in the Dark, for instance. It has so much poetry in it—no politics, no communism. You see, Brecht pulled him into a certain style, which was successful once, but he couldn’t continue all his life writing like that. He studied with Busoni—Busoni was not a jazz composer at all and he came back to the serious style, as you say.

Did Weill ever talk to you about how he felt about Brecht?
No, because he was still developing. He was very young then. A musician always wants his music to be first, the text is second. Weill knew that Brecht’s text was very strong, and he instinctively drew away from it. Weill didn’t want to be a musician and a poet at the same time. Poets are always being pulled down to reality—eating and drinking and money—and, of course, always poor. He got fed up with the idea. That was never what he wanted for himself.
Weill in Vienna

A Report on the 1995 Jeunesse Festival

by Jürg Stenzl

Vienna’s decision to celebrate Kurt Weill’s music during Paul Hindemith’s centennial year does not mean that the composers were in competition. The focus in 1995 on both Weill and Hindemith simply provided a forum to investigate many questions about German music from the twenties and thirties. The tendency in the past to leave Weill out of discussions about music history in his time is easily explained. Being a successful composer, he does not need the type of promotion geared to introducing a forgotten or peripheral composer such as the likes of Othmar Schoeck or Roberto Gerhard. Rather, he requires a more unique approach tailored to foster his acceptance as a composer of Kunstmusik. Even if he had not become a successful composer of Broadway musicals, his tremendous success as a theater composer in Germany means that, from a European point of view, he is still in need of rehabilitation to be accepted in some circles. (By the way, we should try to separate the popular notion of “Bway” from the complex historical reality of music theater in America. Most people—and not only Europeans—tend to imagine a Broadway composer as some sort of fictional motion picture-type character, but they lack any understanding of the historical facts.)

The choice of 1995 for the Kurt Weill celebration had nothing to do with significant dates in his life. Instead, the promotional materials emphasized the prominent cities in which Weill lived—Berlin, Paris, New York—and, as an aside, Vienna, the birthplace of Lotte Lenya. The year 1995 was probably chosen to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. Even so, the promoters did not call attention to other anniversaries in 1995, such as the annihila-
This brings us to the dilemma that remained unsolved in this and virtually every other concert of the festival. On paper, Weill’s music looks simple in both rhythm and melody. The secret to performing this “simple” music, however, lies deceptively hidden in the text. Any performer who does not first study and recite the text and then rework the text into Weill’s musical setting will fail to find the essence of Weill’s phrasing. The same holds for all of Weill’s works, whether in German, French, or English. Weill did not compose in Esperanto, but in language—that is, a dramatic style of language. The current manner of interpreting Weill’s vocal music is infected with the same disease that plagues the interpretation of 18th-century secco recitative. Without a feeling for language, for rhyme and rhythm, and for caesura in the language, Weill’s music cannot be interpreted, but merely recited.

Der Lindberghflug is an important work not only in music history, but also in the specific cultural history of radio as well; its inclusion in the festival also allowed Hindemith to be brought into play, at least in the program booklet. Perhaps this is the time to question the emerging resurgence of uneasiness about a “certain Hindemith” and to pose the question about a “certain Weill” as well. In an exciting discussion at the Südwestfunk that included critic Gerhard R. Koch and pianist Siegfried Mauser, composer Wolfgang Rihm stated about Hindemith, among other things, “Here again we have this compulsive fooling around with counterpoint; in the end, the stressing of the first and third beats in the bar causes the musical action to stand still. The melodic progress is halted in favor of a metric prerequisite. And this is what for me has always seemed so problematic with Hindemith . . . . Sometimes I regret that in Hindemith’s music the biting surrealistic mockery and sinister atmosphere inherent in his drawings is obliterated by overuse of counterpoint” [published in: Paul Hindemith: Ein Komponist und sein Jahrhundert: Eine Sendereihe in 25 Folgen zum 100. Geburtstag von Paul Hindemith, edited by Lotte Thaler (Baden-Baden: Südwestfunk, 1995), p 2, 5]. Both Rihm and Koch were of the opinion that Hindemith “ties everything to a strict style [Satztypus]. . . . yet he fears delivering himself not to contemporary times but to the flowing musical time [p. 10]. . . . But where there is danger, there is also salvation, and somehow in Hindemith there must lie danger. Otherwise we would not be so eager to salvage something.”

Numbers 5 and 9 in Weill’s Der Lindberghflug are countрапuntal “inventions,” a type of motor-driven counterpart similar to that of Hindemith. We can also find comparisons in number 14, the “Triumphmarsch.” In the program notes we read (among many other crude assertions) that Der Lindberghflug “is thoroughly operatic, typified by expressive declarations and immediately gripping and appealing in its sonorous fullness.” Was the author thinking about Berg and Krenek, or maybe even Puccini? However many operatic traits might be at play, conductor Jan Latham-König was unable to bring out its musical characteristics. He seemed to take Motorik as the essential attribute of the work—the only one, apparently.

Weill’s Second Symphony, performed in the same concert, invited even more comparison to Hindemith, especially the Mathis der Maler symphony. In the 1930s composers began writing conventional symphonies again, even without the kind of political pressure experienced by Shostakovich in the USSR and other composers in Germany, for example. (Aaron Copland’s re-orientation towards the “common man” happened at exactly the same time.) The first-movement trumpet solo and the Largo of Weill’s symphony point unmistakably to Mahler. Here Weill’s music excels through melodic strength, through pathos, never broken by either orchestration or the type of musical writing. Yet the melody calls out for a text. Weill’s melodic idiom is so identified with his vocal and theatrical works that it is difficult to listen to this slow movement as absolute music.

More importantly, we can recognize in Der Silbersee and Die Bürgschaft—the last works he wrote in Germany, before his exile to France and America—the same turn toward conservatism that affected his contemporaries. The divorce of the European Weill from the American Weill is certainly the result of the totally different structure of theater and concert life that Weill found in America. But we must also remember that Weill did not write any instrumental music after the Second Symphony. Therein lies one explanation of Weill’s American style. A second explanation is apparent from the very beginning of his creative output: Weill is a musical chameleon, who can rather expeditiously take up different idioms by integrating them to great effect into his theater music. Theater music has almost never had to answer to the demands of stylistic unity that are expected in orchestral and—most of all—chamber music. Even in his concert music (as demonstrated as early as his First Symphony [1921]) Weill reveals his eclectic personality by eschewing the convention of stylistic unity.

In the next event in the festival, at the historic Musikverein, the home of the Vienna Philharmonic, Dimitrij Sitkovetsky played the Violin Concerto brilliantly while at the same time conducting the accompanying Wiener Virtuosen. Comparisons with Busoni’s Arlecchino and Turandot come readily to mind, as does the commonly-made comparison with Stravinsky’s Histoire du soldat. The first movement is, without question, over-orchestrated, and a conductor is essential to achieve the proper balance between the soloist and the wind accompaniment. Whether its form is intended to be free (in the manner of Debussy) or whether it represents a belated expressionistic heritage requires closer examination. Weill exposes his fondness for hybrid forms most in the central movement, Notturno-Cadenza-Serenata, by combining two character pieces—the brittle sound of Stravinsky’s Octet or Piano Concerto and the traditional virtuostic cadenza—into a single movement. The concert concluded with a semi-staged performance (with dancer) of the entire Histoire du soldat, a work which presents a completely untraditional treatment of the solo violin.
Another concert in the Musikverein, this one with the Ensemble Modern under HK Gruber, brought Weill and Hindemith into direct confrontation. The ensemble played Hindemith’s Kammermusik numbers one and two with virtuosity. Hindemith’s own performances of his chamber music preserved on recordings demonstrate that as a performer he avoided comfortable, middle-of-the-road interpretations and instead drove his music to the extremes. Hindemith the interpreter, like Hindemith the cartoonist, went to the limits and played at high risk. The Ensemble Modern did likewise and delivered stunning performances.

Weill did not fare so well with the Ensemble’s problematic interpretation of Kleine Dreigroschenmusik and, with the focus turned to Gruber as chansonnier (with microphone!), renditions of Berlin im Licht, David Drew’s adaptation Of-Musik, and Suite Panaméricaine (comprised of four incidental numbers from Marie Galante, 1934). Rather than taking a fresh look at these pieces, Gruber reinforced two stereotypical misunderstandings. First, the Ensemble “hacked” the Dreigroschenmusik in a manner similar to typical interpretations of Hindemith. These tunes are so familiar that an astute reading must be brought to bear in order not to restate the worn-out clichés. Second, the vocal numbers were served with an overdose of Viennese Schmalz [“ver-vonert”]. This sort of operetta sentimentality was totally out of place here. None of this can be blamed on Weill.

Programming continued to be a hit-or-miss affair throughout the month-long festival. For instance, why did the Arcus Ensemble Wien combine Weill’s String Quartet, op. 8 with, of all things, Eisler’s String Quartet, op. 75 from his American exile, Hindemith’s Clarinet Quartet (1938), and Busoni’s Suite for Clarinet and String Quartet from 1880? Far more logical choices would have been Busoni’s Klassenspiel, Milhaud’s 6th and 7th string quartets, Krenek’s quartets opp. 23 and 24, or Hans Krása’s 1923 quartet. Or they might have even considered a more famous crowd-pleaser that shows amazing Weillisms: Poulenc’s Sextet for Piano and Wind Quintet (1932).

On the other hand, conductor Vladimir Fedoseyev and the NDR-Sinfonieorchester Hamburg presented a convincing combination of Weill’s First Symphony (1921), Quidlibet (a suite of music from the children’s pantomime Zauberwacht [1922]), and Stravinsky’s Petrushka Suite. The festival concluded with an all-American program with Peter Keuschnig again conducting the NDR orchestra in Central Park in the Dark by Charles Ives, five of Aaron Copland’s American Songs (1950 and 1952), and Weill’s orchestral versions of the four Walt Whitman Songs. Rounding out the concert was Robert Russell Bennett’s Porgy and Bess Potpourri followed by the overture and four vocal numbers from Street Scene, featuring American singers Roberta Alexander (soprano) and Damon Evans (tenor).

Anyone who opens Weill’s oeuvre up to serious discussion must do it within the context of the theater. This was demonstrated all too clearly by the concert performance of Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny in the Großer Konzerthaussaal under the direction of Jan Latham-König. All of what I said earlier about approaching Weill’s music from the text (he probably would have instructed singers to take a meticulous approach to the Gestik in his music) became even more valid here, especially since the conductor failed to draw a sharp portrayal of the music. Again the performers let themselves be carried away by the music, rather than gaining control of it. It is not a disparagement of Weill to say that Mahagonny is magnificent theater music. It was written completely and totally for the stage; and therein lies its strength or, if done in a concert hall, its weakness. Elektra and especially Wozzeck, theatrically effective as they are, can be labeled as “symphonic poems” with accompanying voices. The entire drama of Wozzeck is contained within the orchestral music, and the stage has been composed into it, so to speak. In his words, Berg composed his opera like an “ideal stage director.” But in Mahagonny, singing, Gestik, stage design, and orchestra are molded into one dramatic unity.

For actual music theater, the festival had to rely on the “off-scene” Neue Oper Wien to mount Der Silbersee in the small Jugenstiltheater, located outside the city’s center in the fourteenth district. Silbersee, a Schauspieloper that falls between opera and theater, presents difficulties even beyond the usual ones with Weill. It can be thought of as a theater piece with an overwhelming amount of incidental music, or as an opera comique with demanding acting roles. It is difficult today to find actors who can sing, even to the lower level that is required by a work like Die Dreigroschenoper. The problems inherent in performing Der Silbersee can be solved only by a big opera house. The nature of the text presents another problem: Kaiser’s social parable strikes a modern audience as naively idealistic. Anyone who produces this work with great love but limited means can hope only for a “vindication of honor” [Ehrenrettung]. Commendable, yes; but such an approach cannot do justice to the work.

It never became clear how stage director Bruno Berger found significance in the work for himself, and therefore for us. He remained faithful to the text and transported it into more or less suitable images, eventually culminating in one idyllic matter-of-fact [neaschliche] tableau. There were musical problems as well. The orchestra, under the direction of Walter Kobéra, drowned out the singers and played without nuance. The singers, again, fell into the usual traps described earlier in this article.

Der Silbersee is atypical of Weill in its unity; the self-contained score lasts approximately 70 minutes. The music’s uniformity corresponds to the linear quality of Kaiser’s text; it hardly shows a trace of montage or stylistic breaks. Kim Kowalke is right in his description of Der Silbersee as a “synthesis of elements found in earlier compositions” [Kurt Weill in Europe (New Haven: Yale, 1979), p. 307]. As mentioned before, many composers in the early 1930s felt a tendency towards a kind of synthesis; the best known theoretical example is Hindemith’s Unterweisung im Tonsatz. But, without making a value judgment, it must be said that this synthesis came about because of conservative omens [Vorzeichen]. Such is the case with Hindemith and Casella, Stravinsky and Honegger, Copland and Shostakovich—and also with Weill. When considering Der Silbersee (and also Die Bürgschaft, which is without question the most important score from Weill’s late European period) the consequence of this synthesis is a topic that cries out for further research. I cannot help feeling that while Weill’s music gained a certain unity [Geschlossenheit] during this period, it also lost some theatrical strength. Neither Georg Kaiser nor Caspar Neher provided Weill with the challenges that Brecht did. For Weill, other authors and other forms of theater now had become a necessity. He found them in America.

Jeunesse’s Kurt-Weill-Festival made one thing clear as we steadily approach Weill’s centenary, when the entire world will celebrate and perform Weill just as it did with Hindemith in 1995: We must formulate new questions in response to the scope of his entire oeuvre. The answers to those questions might reveal Weill to be a far more complex personality than he himself would have been prepared to admit.

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Books

Portrait of a Marriage

by Rodney Milnes

A review essay of

*Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*

edited and translated by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke


[Excerpts from the book appear on pages 12-15.]

“My only consolation,” wrote Weill to Lenya from Yugoslavia, brooding on the failure of *Kingdom for a Cow* in 1935, “is the Verdi letters, which I’m reading again. The analogies are startling.” Maybe more startling than he realized. Just as readers can feel faintly, near-voyeuristically guilty at reading the letters of Verdi and Giuseppina Strepponi—so intimate, so intensely private—so it is with the Weill-Lenya correspondence, conducted without any thought of eventual publication. Their marriage, or rather marriages, remain unique, as incomprehensible to outsiders as they were to insiders, who couldn’t understand why or how they stayed together. The Verdi marriage was equally mysterious, and so was Richard Strauss’s in a completely different way. The reason for reading the letters, as for publishing them, is for the insights they provide into the mind of a relentlessly enigmatic composer; as Lenya famously said, even after 26 years she never really felt she knew him.

The surviving correspondence—with frustrating gaps during the Brecht collaboration and the gestation of most of the major American works—falls into seven neat sections. The first, sadly one-sided (Lenya’s first letter is dated 1933), provides perhaps the key to the marriage, when Weill writes in 1925, “there must be nothing petty between us, because one lifetime is not enough for two human beings to explore the cosmos that lies between them.” Shortly after, they started living together, following an amazingly overheated effusion from Weill reminiscent of Act 2 of *Tristan* (but shorter).

The second section, covering Lenya’s affair with Otto Pasetti, the divorce, and the early years of exile in Paris, is enormously depressing—the nadir, you feel, of Weill’s life. His misery is mostly between the lines, though the signings-off get progressively cooler; he pretends to believe in the “systems” with which Lenya and her lover are gambling away his money, sends greetings to Pasetti and arranges for him to appear in *The Seven Deadly Sins*; the sense of relief when the affair flounders and he can finally refer to Pasetti as “a swindler” is palpable. The depth of his despair is revealed when the editors include part of a letter to Erika Neher, giving vent to feelings he would never express to Lenya, to whom he writes repeatedly offering money. Such are the stratagems of relationships. All this while he was scrabbling for work, suffering personal attacks in Paris and a severe crisis of confidence with attendant attacks of psoriasis—it is hard not to dislike Lenya at this stage.

The near-daily letters in 1935 between Weill in London and Lenya in Paris (and later vice versa) signal a rebirth, emotionally if not artistically—Weill trying to tempt her to join him (“everyone is sure you could have a big career over here”), she playing it with caution. She visits, but does not join him on holiday, whence he writes, perhaps more with hope than complete confidence, that “we’ve really solved the question of living together, which is so terribly difficult for us, in a very beautiful and proper way.” His pushing her for the role of Miriam in *The Eternal Road* is, you feel, a form of insurance for her joining him in the United States, much though this mystified their friends.
The 1937 series between Weill in Hollywood, where he was trying to earn money with an interesting mix of cynicism and desperation, and Lenya in New York, where her career as a cabaret singer fizzled out, are near-daily. The tone is lightly affectionate, with fascinating gossip about Fritz Lang, Walter Wanger and the Spewacks, vain efforts to acquire the rights to Molnar’s Liliom, and a sudden hiatus when Lenya goes off-line and Weill gets decidedly cool, warning her about her choice of friends. She delays joining him, despite repeated invitations, until the following year.

The warmest series comes from 1941-42 when Lenya was on tour with Helen Hayes in Maxwell Anderson’s A Candle in the Wind. Again, almost daily; hugely intimate and affectionate despite lovers on both sides, full of delightful gossip about the perils of working with the Lunts. There’s a revealing moment when Weill considers giving the impoverished Brecht a monthly $50 allowance, to which Lenya replies with a panic-stricken telegram ordering him to do no such thing, followed by a long letter giving her reasons—absolutely riveting stuff. She knew her Brecht. She busily buys furniture and effects for Brook House from all over the States, and clothes for her husband; he gives detailed reports on the progress of the garden. A picture emerges of near-domestic bliss, reinforced by Lenya’s “I missed you so much” when exploring New Orleans, and her sudden, unique signing-off as “Dein Weib.” These are wonderful letters.

So are those of Weill’s second Hollywood period (1942-4), in which he describes his efforts to get Ira Gershwin to work on Firebrand of Florence—it is ironic that the gestation of this, his least known work, “my first Broadway opera,” is the most fully documented in these letters, and Lenya’s input shows just how much he relied on her judgment. Their post-mortem on its failure also shows them very much at home in the shark-infested waters of Broadway: it was of course everyone’s fault but their own, though Weill’s insistence against everyone else’s better judgment on casting her as the Duchess seems to have contributed to the failure. The warmth, relaxed intimacy, and playful obscenities of the American letters are in stark contrast to the guarded tone of the Paris-London correspondence. They seem, misleadingly, to indicate a cloudless marital sky, yet Weill’s attachment to a (still) anonymous woman in Hollywood was the greatest threat to the marriage; Lenya threatened to move out of Brook House and the crisis may have contributed to his shockingly early death. Weill’s rejoicing at the end of World War II—“we are still young and can enjoy what is considered the best of everything against everyone else’s better judgment on casting her as the Duchess seems to have contributed to the failure. The warmth, relaxed intimacy, and playful obscenities of the American letters are in stark contrast to the guarded tone of the Paris-London correspondence. They seem, misleadingly, to indicate a cloudless marital sky, yet Weill’s attachment to a (still) anonymous woman in Hollywood was the greatest threat to the marriage; Lenya threatened to move out of Brook House and the crisis may have contributed to his shockingly early death. Weill’s rejoicing at the end of World War II—“we are still young and can enjoy what is considered the best of everything” —makes that early death tragically ironic.

So much for the letters, and what might be called the voyeur dimension. It is not for anyone to understand other people’s marriages: it is enough to say that the letters movingly reveal an indissoluble personal and artistic bond. What do they tell us of the enigmatic composer? He emerges as a mass of contradictions. He was basically shy, yet had no objection to being lionized—his reception in what was then Palestine in the final section of letters pleased him greatly. He was basically charitable, yet could be extremely sharp—his repeated excoriation of Klemperer, as well as various collaborators, can be alarming. He was worldly-wise (seeing through Hollywood in a flash, but playing it for all he could get) yet strangely childlike, basking in often imaginary adulation (from Antheil, Wanger, and Chaplin among others). He was basically calm, but knew the value of temperament, threatening to walk out of Firebrand at a crucial stage. Basically serious, he had a delicious sense of humor, christening Lenya’s Italian tapeworm “Adolf.”

The letters confirm that there was little of the “ivory-tower” composer about him, even in early years: he was right down there in the marketplace getting his hands dirty. He had to; in the first years of exile there was money to be earned, and he constantly “talked up” himself and his work—the words “the best music I’ve written up to now” recur regularly. He was hard-nosed and realistic about his career; again, the analogy is with Verdi in that he plainly regarded his U.S. period as “galley years,” setting his sights on a postwar era when he could return to the American equivalent of opera—Street Scene and Lost in the Stars point the way. (Tragically he was not spared.) To that end he integrated himself in U.S. society, showing great impatience, disgust even, with the cliquish Hollywood expatriates. His closest friends were all American.

His humanism shines constantly through the letters, from his horrified description of Essen in 1927 on a trip with Brecht planning the aborted “Ruhrepos” project, right through to his starry-eyed appreciation of pre-lapsarian Palestine twenty years later, though not all the views he expressed there will be considered politically correct. Various plans with Paul Robeson, a figure definitely eyed appreciation of pre-lapsarian Palestine twenty years later, though not all the views he expressed there will be considered politically correct. Various plans with Paul Robeson, a figure definitely viewed as politically incorrect at the time, show that Lost in the Stars was no chance event. Weill wanted to change the world.

The editing of the book, footnotes, fore-words and after-words, biographical glossary and all, is impeccable, though the editors appear to be more discreet about Weill’s extramarital interests than Lenya’s—maybe their art reflects life. Lenya’s brief, very useful autobiographical sketch is included. I wonder only if Weill’s London address of “Brancham Gardens” is a mis-reading—it is not to be found in current or elderly street directories. And there are no clues to those three Weill “rosebuds”—the name Jenny, ships, and executions. Enigmas remain, but the composer is a great deal less enigmatic than he was before the publication of this volume. It is simply invaluable.

Rodney Milnes is Editor of Opera magazine (London).
Excerpts from

Speak Low (When You Speak Love)
The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya
Edited and translated by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke
University of California Press, 1996

WEILL IN BERLIN TO LENYA IN GRUNHEIDE, [1925]

Muschi, süßes,

Now I’ll tell you anyway what this letter will be about. And pass over our misunderstanding in silence, because silence will tell you best how your look tore me apart when we said goodbye to each other. Weariness? Oh no! But this occasion is too important to dwell on that—and my feeling for you so tremendous that no everyday event can possibly compete with it. There must be nothing petty between us, because one lifetime is not enough for two human beings to explore the cosmos that lies between them.

What I wanted to tell you is that I desire nothing more passionately than to be endlessly good to you. I know that ugliness must disappear from your life for you to be able to believe that a very kind hand might wipe the pain away. I also know that nobody possesses what you’re longing for as much as I do, because a thousand centuries and twenty-five years have been shaping me.1 I would like to lavish on you all of what I am. Because I have nothing. Is it love? Is it kindness? I don’t know. But you should take it with both hands. It is not a present from me, because it lives only for you; but it could become your present to humanity. It is independent of space, time, or matter. You just have to know and believe strongly that it is there—then it’s already yours. Do you want it?

And do you understand how it hurts when you call me a fool [Tschumpel], and I look at you in disbelief that this word could come from you; and how afterward I’m dazed and helpless when you ask me for the smallest, simplest thing? You know that I’m not good natured, that I’ve always been a bore and not well liked, and that I am not “good.” But there has to be somebody with whom I can let go; otherwise I will choke on my own optimism. You are something wonderful to which my faith clings. I savor the fact that you’re alive. And it’s incomprehensible that you might be able to love me. That I may love you is bliss enough.

Very much yours,
Äppelheim

1. Weill turned twenty-five on 2 March 1925, but the date of the letter cannot be precisely determined.