

Kurt Weill

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Adopting a New Homeland

J. Bradford Robinson investigates how Weill learned American song form

*Leonard J. Lehrman discovers Few Little English,
a song written for Lenya by Marc Blitzstein in 1936*

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Cover photo: Weill and Lenya (center) arrive in New York Harbor on 10 September 1935 with Francesco von Mendelssohn, Eleanora von Mendelssohn, and Meyer Weisgal. Photo: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

Learning the New Ropes: Kurt Weill and the American Theater Song

by J. Bradford Robinson



Photograph of Weill taken shortly after his arrival in America and printed in the program book for *The Eternal Road*, 1937.

J. Bradford Robinson is an American musicologist living in Germany as a freelance writer–translator. He has degrees from Harvard, Berkeley, and the Technical University of Berlin and has translated two books by Carl Dahlhaus. He is presently engaged in editing the *Mahagonny Songspiel* for the Kurt Weill Edition and writing a book on the history of the German jazz age.

When Kurt Weill left Europe for America in September of 1935—permanently, as it turned out—he left behind not only his native language, his social surroundings, and his business contacts, but also the German popular song forms and syncopated dance music that had nourished so much of his work for the European stage. Early in his New York exile he seems to have realized that American popular music differed fundamentally from the purportedly “American” roots of his European scores. Accordingly, and with his usual thoroughness, he set about relearning large parts of his craft. Traces of these efforts—sketches, notes, rudimentary exercises—have survived more or less by chance among his posthumous papers. They reveal that from 1936 to about 1938 Weill made a conscious effort to master the American theater song on three levels at once: its compositional fabric, its formal design, and its disposition within the musical play.

A more detailed, German-language version of sections of this paper can be found in *Kurt Weill-Studien* (Veröffentlichungen der Kurt-Weill-Gesellschaft Dessau, Band 1), Stuttgart: M&P Verlag, 1996, pp. 133–152, to which the reader is referred for complete bibliographic references.

I

It is at first glance surprising to find Weill, already a master craftsman in the European tradition, stooping to the level of the amateur American tunesmith and writing out harmony exercises intended for aspiring Tin Pan Alley songwriters. Yet several years earlier Alban Berg had done much the same thing when preparing himself for the task of composing *Lulu*, and there can be little doubt (although final proof will probably never be forthcoming) that Weill learned his European *Song* style at least partly from the popular “jazz” tutors then circulating in Weimar Germany. In his few surviving exercises from the mid-thirties—which he labeled “themes” and “breaks”—we can witness the difficulties Weill encountered in translating his European style to an American context. Three areas caused him particular concern: harmony, chromaticism, and piano texture.

Example 1 shows one of Weill’s “theme” exercises. Dissatisfied by this solution, he attempted a second harmonization of the melody with new motion in the inner voices and an interpolated secondary dominant [Example 2]. Obviously Weill’s main concern was to enliven the static harmony of the inner voices. What he perhaps overlooked is that the tonic major seventh chord in the final bar is not idiomatic to Tin Pan Alley composers, most of whom would undoubtedly have chosen an A^9 chord instead, initiating a return to C major by way of the circle of fifths.

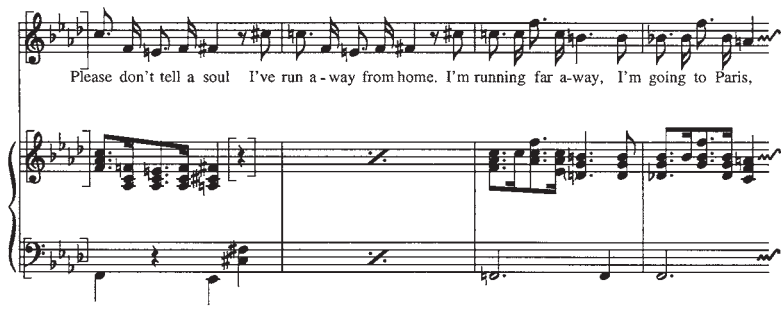
A similar lack of concern for the American predilection for dominant ninths and circle of fifths is apparent in Example 3, which shows Weill implanting his European brand of chromaticism into a Tin Pan Alley formula. Quite apart from the Schumannesque dissonance in measure 4, Weill’s preference for super-tonic seventh chords (known in American jazz parlance as “half-diminished”) and his apparently deliberate avoidance of fifth-related chord progressions make this harmonization stand out from contemporary products. Nor is the plagal cadence from bar 6 to bar 7 accountable within the American popular song style. Without wishing to appear to “correct” Weill’s exercise, it is perhaps worth comparing it to an alternative harmonization more attuned to Tin Pan Alley formulas. Example 4 shows what a typical songwriter might have produced for the same melody.

“Europeanisms” of the sort illustrated by examples 1 to 3 abound in Weill’s first American scores, especially *Johnny Johnson* (1936), giving them not only a distinctive personal stamp but a decidedly non-Broadway flavor. Before long, however, perhaps as a result of such exercises, he could successfully negotiate the American harmonic idiom to produce such masterful creations as “Speak Low” (1943), “My Ship” (1941), or even *Buddy on the Nightshift* (1942), all three of which not only luxuriate in dominant ninths worked into circle-of-fifth patterns, but reveal the American fondness for writing diatonic (in the first two cases even strongly pentatonic) melodies while consigning chromaticism to the accompaniment.

Example 1

Examples 1-3: Kurt Weill’s untitled harmony exercises, ca. 1937-38. Transcribed from the Weill-Lenya Papers, Yale University Music Library, Ser.I.A., box 14, folder 236. The source of the melody is unknown.

Example 2
Example 3
Example 4: Alternative solution by author.



Please don't tell a soul I've run a-way from home. I'm running far a-way. I'm going to Paris.

Example 5

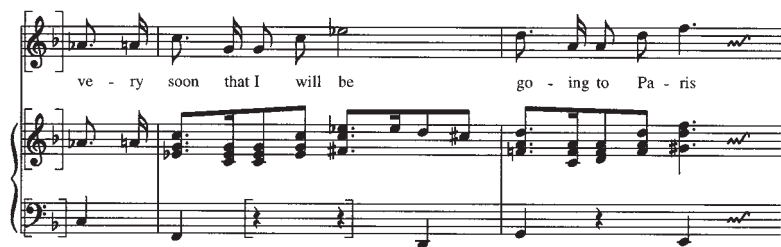
Examples 5–10: Untitled sketches transcribed from the Weill-Lenya Papers, Yale University Music Library, Ser.I.A., box 12, folder 209.



I'm go - ing to Pa-ris, where the streets are paved with gold

Example 6


I'll have dukes and counts to ride a round with in my diamond studded limousine

Example 7


ve - ry soon that I will be go - ing to Pa - ris

Example 8**II**

Leaving the level of compositional fabric for the higher level of formal design, we again find Weill confronting a novel and unfamiliar idiom. A brief summary of the main differences is perhaps called for here. German popular song of the twenties was based on a strophic verse-refrain form with three dominant characteristics:

- 1) the verse and refrain were approximately equal in length and significance, and were repeated (usually three times) as a single unit;
- 2) the refrain contrasted with the verse in its greater emphasis on melody and often by a change of mode (minor to major) or rhythm (e.g., dotted eighths to quarter notes);
- 3) the text of the verse was varied while that of the refrain remained largely unchanged, so that the verse carried the narrative forward.

Weill's *Songs* of the twenties and early thirties can be viewed either as close replicas of this form (paradigmatically in the "Petroleum-Song" ["Muschel von Margate"]) or as imaginative variants of it (e.g., "Seeräuberjenny" with its drastically foreshortened refrain), but they invariably rely upon a German verse-refrain structure with threefold repetition.

By the thirties, however, American popular songwriters had largely abandoned this structure for the verse-chorus form preferred by second-generation Tin Pan Alley composers:

- 1) the verse, if not omitted entirely, was usually reduced to a *parlando* introduction ("setup") to the refrain ("chorus") and was generally excluded from the repeats;
- 2) a new element of contrast emerged in the so-called "channel," "bridge," or "release" (as the B section of the thirty-two-bar AABA chorus form is variously known) to replace the former contrast between verse and refrain;
- 3) sometimes the text of the chorus was altered at each repetition, thereby shifting the narrative function from the now atrophied verse to the chorus itself.

We can witness Weill's growing awareness of these differences in the genesis of one particular number which—judging from the amount of surviving sketch material and alternate versions—must have cost him particular effort: "Johnny's Song." This number, which was later to assume importance as the title song and (to quote librettist Paul Green) "theme melody" of *Johnny Johnson*, originally came into being as a brief *scena* for singer-actor. In this form it has survived in an untitled and unfinished sketch among Weill's papers, perhaps intended as a vehicle for Lotte Lenya along the lines of Weill's likewise unfinished *The Fräulein and the Little Son of the Rich* or even Blitzstein's *Few Little English* discussed elsewhere in this issue. The lightweight sketch deals with the fantasies of an unnamed protagonist who imagines fleeing

secretly to Paris, only to have his (or her) escapist reveries interrupted by a choir of unseen voices with the words “Too late, too late, you’ve lost your only chance.” Interestingly, Weill initially conceived this miniature theater piece, the first stage in the evolution of “Johnny’s Song,” in a German verse-refrain form. The opening of the verse appears in Example 5.

The refrain switches to the major mode and reveals the well-known melody of “Johnny’s Song,” but in the same jaunty foxtrot rhythm of the verse, and hence at twice the tempo it would assume in later versions [Example 6]. It is cast in an American AABA song form, but with complications that, as we shall see, eventually led to no fewer than three release sections. The first release, a variant of a well-known Tin Pan Alley formula (it is rhythmically identical to, for example, the release of the 1928 hit *It Had To Be You*), almost takes on a *parlando* character with its separately syllabified sixteenths, shown in Example 7.

The return of the A section, rather than ending the chorus, leads to a second release section which, in its original dramatic context, functions as a Puccini-like peroration on the protagonist’s Parisian daydream [Example 8]. Note the rising sequence of the melody, the richness of the harmonies, the rubato tempo, and the harmonic abruptness of the retransition to the tonic: none of these features is typical of American song production of the 1930s. Taken together, they provide the first inkling that we are dealing with something more than a popular song, namely, with a dramatically heightened theater number. The return of the A section is, however, cut short by the chorus of invisible “Voices” which functions formally as a third release. At this point [Example 9], the daydream is abruptly exploded and our protagonist is forced to return to mundane reality. After this outburst the A section returns, with the voices now adding a background counterpoint. But here the sketch breaks off in mid-phrase with no indication of how the piece might have ended.

III

The reasons that led Weill to abandon his piece in mid-composition will probably never be known, but certainly the difficulties of finding a satisfactory conclusion to an American theater song with a triple release may have been among them. Furthermore, the sketch lacks a feature known in the songwriter’s trade as a “hook,” a catchy device, usually in the A section, that will capture the listener’s fancy without becoming cloying upon repetition. The next stages in the genesis of “Johnny’s Song” find Weill grappling with both of these problems at once: the release and the hook.

First, Weill found it expedient to abandon the homogeneous foxtrot rhythm so familiar from his European scores and to slow the melody to a ballad tempo by quadrupling its note values. The result [Example 10], as captured in a surviving sketch of the

Example 9 shows a musical score with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a higher register and has the lyrics "Too late, too late, you've missed your on-ly chance". The piano accompaniment is in a lower register and features a complex, syncopated rhythm with many sixteenth notes. The score is in a key with one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

Example 9

Example 10 shows a single melodic line in a key with one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is slow and features a rising sequence of notes, characteristic of a ballad tempo.

Example 10

Example 11 shows a musical score with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Moderato assai" and the dynamics are "pp". The vocal line is in a higher register and features a rising sequence of notes. The piano accompaniment is in a lower register and features a complex, syncopated rhythm with many sixteenth notes. The score is in a key with one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

Example 11: Kurt Weill, “Johnny’s Melody” as it appears in the *Johnny Johnson* vocal score (Samuel French, 1940), p. 17.

A section (but without text, piano accompaniment, or continuation), was a melody much closer to the final form of “Johnny’s Song,” but of a rhythmic blandness that places it close to the Salvation Army songs from *Happy End* or the “Youkali” song from *Marie Galante*—melodies that were likewise used in the score of *Johnny Johnson*.

This second stage in the evolution of “Johnny’s Song” still lacks its Americanesque lilt as well as the distinctive, slightly willful syncopation on the second beat. This latter syncopation, a curious eighth-note anticipation of the “kick” to beat 3, did not appear until the third stage of this number, as captured in the score of *Johnny Johnson* [Example 11]. Here it doubtless served a dual function: to set the character of the “theme melody” (and hence the title-hero) slightly apart from its petit-bourgeois surroundings and to function as a hook for theater audiences.

By this stage in the evolution of “Johnny’s Song,” the original refrain melody had been augmented to twice the note values of stage 1 (or halved from its ballad version in stage 2), while the rhythm of the accompaniment remained the same. The verse, with its European flavor and proportions, has disappeared entirely. But what about the three releases? The first release section has been taken over from the sketch in its original note values, thereby producing the necessary rhythmic contrast with the reworked A section. As in the harmony exercises analyzed above, a certain predilection for the tonic seventh (in bar 4) proclaims its allegiance to Weill’s European style, but otherwise the first release fulfills its function well enough. The second release has also been retained, interrupting the A section with the same element of yearning as in the sketch, but now harnessed to a different dramatic purpose. The third, formerly taken by the offstage voices, obviously had to be discarded in the new dramatic context. In its stead we hear a haunting new melody (p. 88 of the Samuel French vocal score) characterizing the now chastened Johnny as a street vendor of children’s toys. Despite its unusual twelve-bar length, the descending sequence of its melodic line announces its character as a release, and accordingly it leads into a final statement of the A section.

Each of the three release sections in “Johnny’s Song” solves the problem of the release in a different way. The first introduces a new rhythmic pattern, shortens the phrases of the melody by half, halves the harmonic rhythm, and sets out in the mediant in order to modulate back to the tonic. The second retains the rhythmic pattern and phrase length of the A section but introduces an ascending melody that modulates rapidly into the “sharp” key areas, necessitating an abrupt *rallentando* to return to the tonic. The third introduces yet another rhythmic pattern and sets out in yet another key area (the submediant) in order to descend to the tonic; but the slower harmonic rhythm and haunting “half-diminished” harmonies seem to suggest an expansiveness beyond the confines of “Johnny’s Song” itself, as though we were about to enter an elaborate coda. The return of the A section seems almost to interrupt this new process.

Obviously a song with a triple release was anything but common in the American music theater of the thirties. Weill’s publishers were certainly aware of this when they issued the number in a popular sheet music format (as “To Love You and to Lose You,” 1936), for they recast the third release as a brief piano introduction and left the piece in AABACA form, presumably to make it more readily marketable.

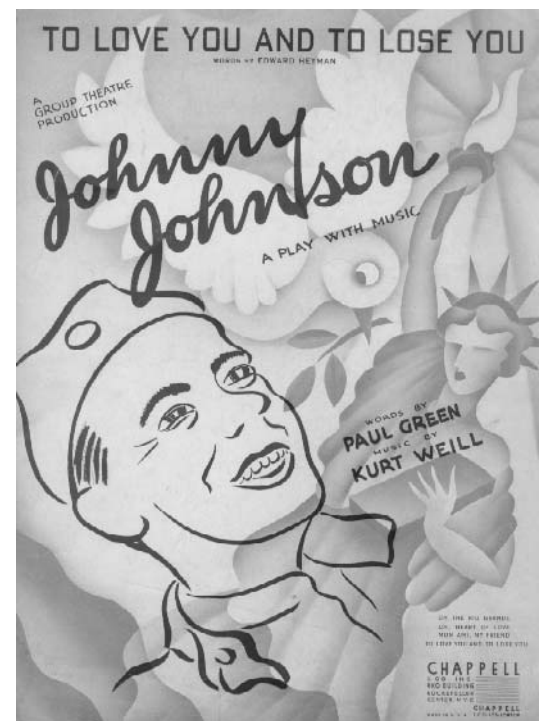
IV

Weill encountered another fundamental difference from his European theater style when he considered large-scale dramaturgical form. American musical theater of the thirties thrived on the repetition of a small number of “song hits,” which were not only reprised throughout the evening (often the last act consisted of nothing but reprises), but were rehashed again and again as so-called “utilities”: bow music, exit music, fillers, and so forth. Nothing in Weill’s European stage works had prepared him for this massive amount of repetition; it had served either the function of reminiscence (e.g., the quotation of the “Barbara-Song” in the third “Dreigroschenfinale”) or of dramatic recapitulation (the finales of *Mahagonny Songspiel* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*). Nor had he needed to deal with the problems of “layout,” that is, the manner in which a theater song is presented over the course of an evening’s entertainment: the number of stanzas, its distribution among the characters, its repetition by the orchestra, and the number, placement and length of its reprises. Quite early in his American career, Weill seems to have been concerned with finding a dramaturgical justification for Broadway’s penchant for repetition. “Johnny’s Song” is the first instance of what was to become a series of attempted solutions to the problem of the multiple reprise.

In the “original” version of the score to *Johnny Johnson*—by which today we mean the piano-conductor score reconstructed by Lys Symonette in 1971 to include all of the cut music—“Johnny’s Song” was heard no fewer than four times: as a single-stanza song in G major (Act 1, Scene 1, No. 5), as an instrumental interlude for solo banjo (Act 1, Scene 4, No. 13), as an eighteen-bar instrumental reminiscence (Act 2, No. 29), and finally in the triple-release version described above to conclude the evening (No. 33). (Even in the version published by Samuel French in 1940, “Johnny’s Song” still retained three of its occurrences.) At its first hearing in No. 5, the song is shorn of the two later releases and presented as a simple thirty-two bar AABA chorus, in which guise Johnny is introduced as the quintessential American common man singing a conventional American popular song. The next occurrence preserves the second release of the sketch with its character of unfulfilled yearning (marked, however, “can be omitted”), and adds the new third release, even calling for it to be repeated. The third occurrence is a simple reminiscence reintroducing Johnny after his experiences in the trenches of World War I; only the A section is heard, and it merges into a reprise of the escapist “Youkali” melody. The fourth occurrence, however, presents the exploded triple-release version in its full length. The second release, being texted, is now mandatory, and the

poignant melody of the third release (specifically referred to by Johnny as “my song”), though untexted, is meant, according to which version of the libretto one reads, to be “raised” or “whistled” by Johnny as he slowly leaves the stage.

What the audience hears then, rather than simple reprises with various new stanzas of text, is the growth of “Johnny’s Song,” in parallel with the transformations within Johnny himself, from a simple thirty-two bar “song hit” to a multiply fractured *scena* that almost assumes the proportions of a large-scale rondo with dramatic episodes. There can be little doubt that Weill intended this progressive increase in complexity to lend an overall shape to a piece of musical theater otherwise threatened with shapelessness by the extreme heterogeneity of its score and the large number and wide variety of its characters. A few years later, in *Lady in the Dark* (1941), audiences could witness the opposite but no less conscious technique at work. Rather than a process of increasing complexity, they could hear, over the course of an evening, an AABA song form gradually crystallized and extracted from the musically complex dream sequences to yield, in a process of simplification, the immortal “My Ship.” By then, however, Weill had already achieved a mastery of the texture, form, and dramaturgical “layout” of the American theater song, a mastery which we can watch emerging in his sketches, exercises and revisions of 1936.



“To Love You and to Lose You,” sheet music cover (Chappell, 1936). Besides altering the form of the song, Chappell commissioned a new set of lyrics by Edward Heyman for popular release.

Few Little English

A Forgotten Song

by Marc Blitzstein for Lenya

by Leonard J. Lehrman



Photographer George Platt Lynes recasts Lenya as an American star, 1935-36.

Leonard J. Lehrman, Ehrenkapellmeister of the Jüdischer Musiktheaterverein Berlin, was Assistant Conductor at the Metropolitan Opera 1977-78 and Studienleiter at Theater des Westens 1983-86. A protégé of Elie Siegmeister and Leonard Bernstein, he has been president of The Long Island Composers Alliance since 1991 and music critic of *Aufbau* since 1995. He plans to accompany soprano Helene Williams in his own edition of *Few Little English* in 1998, in honor of the Lenya Centenary.

The publication of the letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya has resulted in the unearthing of a hitherto virtually unknown song written for Lenya by Marc Blitzstein, dated 15 July 1936, and entitled *Few Little English*.¹ Eric Gordon's *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (St. Martin's, 1989) makes no mention of it. The only extant musical draft of *Few Little English* (located among Lenya's papers at the Yale University Music Library²) includes several revisions. The only other source—an undated draft of the lyrics alone, “Jimmy’s Moll” (housed at the Weill-Lenya Research Center³)—presents a much different version of the text. Together, they offer an editor and performers the opportunity to interpret the most Weillian song Blitzstein ever wrote—complete with allusions to “Barbara-Song” and “Tango-Ballade” from *Die Dreigroschenoper* (as well as references to *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess*)—for the first time since Lenya apparently performed it in a series of appearances at Le Ruban Bleu in New York in April 1938.

Jack Gould reviewed one of those performances in his column for the *New York Times*: “Lotte Lenya (Mrs. Kurt Weill) is the new arrival at Le Ruban Bleu, 4 East Fifty-sixth Street, where she is singing the songs of her husband and Marc Blitzstein, among others. Miss Lenya is an engaging young lady and she does full justice to her husband’s efforts, concerned to quite some extent with the lesser souls on this earth.”⁴ Apparently the song by Blitzstein was successful, as she reported to Weill: “Lately I’d always sing only Blitzstein, ‘Pirate,’ ‘Barbara,’ ‘Kanonensong,’ ‘Right Guy,’ ‘Surabaya.’ . . . The other songs didn’t do so well.” As for her overall impression of the nightclub act, she was less than enthusiastic: “It didn’t do me any harm, and I’ve learned a lot, but so far it hasn’t done me any good, and I hated it more than any previous work.”⁵

An examination of the newly discovered song for Lenya can tell us something about Lenya’s Americanization and how the public would have perceived her as a performer. Even more, it illuminates her fond relationship with Blitzstein and may have contributed to the coolness Weill felt for the younger composer, whose most famous contribution to musical theater would be his American adaptation (after Weill’s death) of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), the production of which established Lenya’s name in the English-speaking world.

Born in Philadelphia on Weill’s fifth birthday, 2 March 1905, Marc Blitzstein studied in Europe from 1926 to 1927 with Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg. In a 1928 series of lectures given in New York and Philadelphia on “The Modern Movement in Music,” he commented about Weill, “. . . as far as I am concerned he hasn’t a thing to say in his music. . . . His music is essentially ugly because it is characterless.” But, he predicted, “Weill is young yet; good things may yet come out of him.”⁶

In 1929 Blitzstein saw *Die Dreigroschenoper* for the first time, in Wiesbaden. His impressions are not recorded, but a letter the following January reveals that he was still unimpressed with Weill, as opposed to Eisler. Five years later, he would write in *Modern Music*, “Success has crowned Kurt Weill, with his super-bourgeois ditties (stilted “Otchi Tchornayas” and “Road-to-Mandalays”) harmonized with a love of distortion and dissonance truly academic.”⁷ This is actually not such an inapt observation, as Jack Gottlieb has pointed out on several occasions: the resemblance between the famous “Barbara-Song” theme and “Otchi Tchornaya” may well be more than coincidental, even if possibly subconscious. Moreover, the phrase is parodied in the first three measures of Blitzstein’s song for Lenya.

The turning point in Blitzstein's appreciation of Weill seems to have been the 17 December 1935 League of Composers concert in New York at which he first heard Lenya sing; "Seeräuberjenny" made a favorable impression this time. "Lenja"—as she then spelled her name—"is too special a talent for a wide American appeal," he wrote, "but she has magnetism and a raw lovely voice like a boy-soprano. Her stylized gestures seem strange because of her natural warmth; but in the strangeness lies the slight enigma which is her charm."⁸ His words mark one of the earliest American understandings of Brechtian epic theater. Also significant, the words he used to describe Lenya's voice are the same ones he used to describe the music of his own Moll in *The Cradle Will Rock*—a work inspired by his meeting with Bertolt Brecht a month after the concert—and of the soul-searching prostitute Stella in his last, unfinished work, *The Magic Barrel* from *Tales of Malamud*. (In a December 1970 interview, Lenya told me that Blitzstein had asked her to play the Moll in the 1960 New York City Opera revival of *Cradle*; she declined and suggested Tammy Grimes, who did perform the role.⁹ It now appears likely that he had had Lenya in mind for it from the very beginning.)

Blitzstein's relationship with women was perhaps as strange as Lenya's with men. Although predominantly homosexual, he was genuinely and physically in love with his wife Eva Goldbeck, whom he lost on 26 May 1936; she died of anorexia. Lenya, who would marry three men after Weill's death (at least two of whom were homosexual), was at the time divorced from Weill. Blitzstein later described his work "at white heat" on *Cradle* during five weeks in the summer of 1936 as a means for overcoming his grief at the loss of Eva. But before he even had begun that work, apparently he turned a sketch originally called "Jimmy's Moll," which included the words "I speak so little English," into the song *Few Little English*, and indicated at the top of the manuscript that the singer was to be "Lenja." Although no known source can verify that this song was the one that Lenya sang in her 1938 nightclub act, it is the most likely candidate, rather than the number she had sung in *I've Got the Tune* a year earlier, which is not really a cabaret number at all. *Few Little English* obviously allowed Lenya to poke fun at her accent and the challenges she faced in learning to perform in English.

The piece is a first-person narrative like the "Barbara-Song" or "Surabaya Johnny," of an abandoned woman in love with a gangster named Jimmy. Jimmy is on the run not only from the police but also from a gang headed by "a man named Malone," whose "territory" Jimmy violated when he "robbed a second story" therein, "on his own." The song is in three strophes, with a refrain in which the narrator (Lenya) asserts "I no good speak English," "I speak only few little English," "I speak very little English," "I speak so little English," and (pencilled into the final piano-vocal draft) "I'm speaking only very little few English" in an effort to get around the landlord, Malone, and the Feds. In the end it does her no good. Resigned to being dragged off to prison (apparently as an accomplice), she speaks the last line in slangy Americanese, "Okay, boys, let's go."

The first two strophes are virtually identical musically; the third begins at a higher pitch and a slightly more frantic rhythm and tempo. The varying rhyme schemes within each strophe and the text differences between the two sources offer the most difficult editorial choices. In the text-only source, "I knew every trick" attempts to rhyme with "I was rich in a week." The score version

Jimmy's Moll

when I first came over
on a boat from Dover
I was just a rover
but I knew every trick
on the boat it was funny
starngers called me honney
then they gave me money
I was rich in a week.
Then I meet Jimmy
and Jimmy said gimmie
and I gave him all I had
that was Chicago
and you know Chicago
Well-Jimmy is a Chicago lad
Jimmy is not in business
not exatly business
kind of irregular business
but he makes lots of cash
and I always like that
then he is suddenly flat
and we have to eat hash
I meet the landlord
and thats where my tricks come
in
Plizz I no good speak English
I speak only few little English
Since I am in this land
I no understand.

well it seems my Jimmy
robbed a second story
in the territory
of a man named Malone
and it seems Malone's mob
they had planed the whole job
but Jimmy that big slob
went on his own
he brought me two mink coats
and cash enough to sink boats
and I felt pretty gay
but he only stopped to kiss me
and tell how he'll miss me
he's taking a little trip
when he is gone I sit there

just a little lonely
for I love my Jimmy only
and now Jimmy is away
and he may have to stay.
suddenly there is a terrible din
and Malone rushes in
he say's come on skirt
and spill where is your lousy
punk
Plizz I speak very little English
I am only speaking English
a cuple month or so
really-I dont know

very soon my Jimmy
sends a mesage to me
everything set my baby
hop a train to you know
so I put my things on
all my cute paste rings on
and my heart has wings on
when I holler hello!
two dozen G-Man
all big heavy He-Man
suround him from near and far
I think oh glory
I tell them a story
how wretched and poor we are
"My wallpaper's crakin
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
My bed's got no back in
pretty curtains lackin
a broken lock on the door
it's the very top floor
I am so tired at night
as I climb up each flight!!
they say-Sister-where you go
you wont have to climb no
more.
Please - I speak so little English
but now it seems my English
is just enough to know
okay boy-let's go

Text by Marc Blitzstein. Transcription of typescript, with spelling errors retained. Weill-Lenya Research Center, Series 26.

Few Little English Marc Blitzstein

Commodo rit atempo
Lenya: mf rit - when I first came

ver
 on a boat from Da-der I was just a
 r-er and I know every trick. on the boat it was fun-ny
 strangers called me 'ho-ney'; then they gave me mo-ney I got rich very
 quick. Then I met Jimmy and Jimmy said 'Jimmy' and I gave him all I
 had That was Chi-cago, and you know Chicago, well it's a Chi-cago

The first page of *Few Little English* by Marc Blitzstein. The fifth page of the manuscript is reproduced on p. 12.

All music examples in this article are taken from Blitzstein's holograph manuscript. The original is in the Weill/Lenya Papers, Yale University Music Library, box 46, folder 1. Copyright on manuscript "Marc Blitzstein 1936." Reprinted with the permission of the Estate of Marc Blitzstein, copyright owner.

improves the rhyme with “I got rich very quick.” Other lines seem better in the text version, however, such as “he brought me two mink coats and cash enough to sink boats,” as opposed to “He came home bearing the gifts of the daring,” which was changed to the even lamer “He brought me a mink fur a night.” There is also a cute double entendre in verse two of the text version: “I felt pretty gay.” It is changed in the score version to something (mostly illegible) about cash in a “grip” in order to rhyme with “he’s taking a little trip.”¹⁰

In strophe 3, “a broken lock on the door” became “there’s no lock on the door,” (p. 6 mm. 13-14) in a casual parody of “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’” from *Porgy and Bess*. (Blitzstein would later use the same kind of quotation from “Stormy Weather” in the title song of *Cradle*.) The narrator’s attempt in the final verse to con the cops with “a story [of] how wretched and poor we are” prefigures the Bulge’s schnorring in “Penny Candy” from Blitzstein’s 1938-41 opera *No for an Answer*, as well as that of the protagonist Mendel in the quasi-Rothschild (aka Fishbein) Scene from his 1963 opera *Idiots First* (completed by this writer in 1973) and the ensemble “You Poor Thing” from *Juno* (1959). The melodic climax of each refrain (p. 3 mm. 1-2; p. 5 mm. 6-7; p. 7 mm. 6-7) is also reminiscent of similar phrases in both the “Barbara-Song” and the “Tango-Ballade” from *Die Dreigroschenoper*.



The shape of this melodic phrase recalls the “Barbara-Song” and “Tango-Ballade.”

Harmonically, the piece is in E-flat, despite a three-bar introduction that begins in a kind of octatonic descending sequence, harmonized with E minor in first inversion, B minor, and then Fmin⁷ in second inversion [see p. 10]. The first eight-bar phrase roams (reflecting the text “I was just a rover”) from E-flat minor to major, modulating up for a second eight-bar phrase in G minor-major. The third eight-bar phrase, marked “Slower,” continues the melodic ascent in E phrygio-mixolydian, cadencing in major; the fourth eight-bar phrase descends symmetrically to C#, cadencing on F#. This brings us to “Tempo I” and the harmonic ambiguity of the introduction, to which Blitzstein returns for the setting of Jimmy’s “business—not exactly business—kind of irregular business” (which became in the score version, “kind of monkey business”). A series of two-bar repetitions and harmonic sequences lands after sixteen bars back in E-flat major for a two-bar interlude reminiscent of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” from Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat*. The nine-bar refrain, overlapping with a three-bar interlude, is unequivocally in E-flat major, but with chromatically descending

underpinning in the inner voices that adds a definitely Weillian touch of pathos.



A reference to “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.”

The melody beginning strophe 3 becomes a frenetic, almost completely chromatic line [see p. 12]. Sixteen bars later everything comes to a halt as the music returns to a “slow” tempo as does the usual third-phrase melody and harmony for four measures, describing the entrance of “Two dozen G-men, all big heavy he-men.” The fourth phrase follows, but in the fast tempo. Then, instead of the tonally ambiguous bridge, the music returns to phrase 1. This time, however, the attempt to modulate up to phrase 2 is unsuccessful; the Feds are obviously not buying her “story.” The end of phrase 1 cleverly segues directly into the last eight bars of the bridge. The melody of the last two bars of the former and the first two bars of the latter is nearly the same, with only a slight change in the harmonization. The tempo slows as the woman complains and the cops reply: “I’m so tired at night, as I climb up each flight. They say, ‘Sister, where you go, you won’t have to climb no more.’ . . . But now I guess my English is just enough to know,” she muses.

And that is how America treats her immigrants, Blitzstein seems to be saying, as he would later, more poignantly, in his portraits of Poles in the Drugstore Scene of *The Cradle Will Rock*, Greek waiters in *No for an Answer*, poor Jews in *Idiots First*, and Italian anarchists in *Sacco and Vanzetti*. “The system’s not so hot,” Lenya would sing in her American radio debut as the Suicide in Blitzstein’s *I’ve Got the Tune* on 24 October 1937. Blitzstein himself played the composer, Mr. Musiker, searching for the right words for his tune, nearly despairing (“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe nobody wants my tune. I think I’ll go back to my ivory tower. . .”) but finally finding them in a mass movement for social justice.

“Coming—the Mass Audience,” Blitzstein proclaimed in the May-June 1936 *Modern Music*. Six months later, in the same publication, he announced: “I have written some harsh things in the past about Kurt Weill and his music. I wish now to write a few good things. He hasn’t changed, I have.”¹¹ After the success of *Cradle*, Weill was heard going around town asking smugly, “Have you seen my new opera?” This story, first told in print by Minna Lederman after Blitzstein’s death in 1964,¹² was denied by Lenya in 1970, but confirmed by Lys Symonette twenty-six years later. Though musicologists have found more indebtedness to Eisler than to Weill in Blitzstein’s music and ideology, with this newly discovered song for Lenya, the early link to her, and to Weill, is established.

Please, I speak so little English I'm only speaking English a
 couple months or so. Really, I don't know
 I just play some my singing starts a message to me
 I hope a train to you - know. So I put my
 things on all my cute pants rings on, and my heart has rings on.

NOTES

1. Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya, *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, ed. and trans. by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke. (Berkeley: University of California, 1996.) See letters 200, 207, and 209 and note on page 256.

2. Yale University Music Library, Archival Collection MSS 30, The Papers of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya (Series III, box 46, folder 1). Photocopy in the Weill-Lenya Research Center (Series 17).

3. Weill-Lenya Research Center (Series 26).

4. Jack Gould, "News and Gossip of Night Clubs," *New York Times* (17 April 1938): sec. 10, p. 2.

5. Weill and Lenya, *Speak Low*, p. 264.

6. Quoted in Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 40–41.

7. Marc Blitzstein, "Popular Music—An Invasion," *Modern Music* (January–February 1933) 10, no. 2: 101.

8. Marc Blitzstein, "New York Medley, Winter, 1935," *Modern Music* (January–February 1936) 13, no. 2: 34–40.

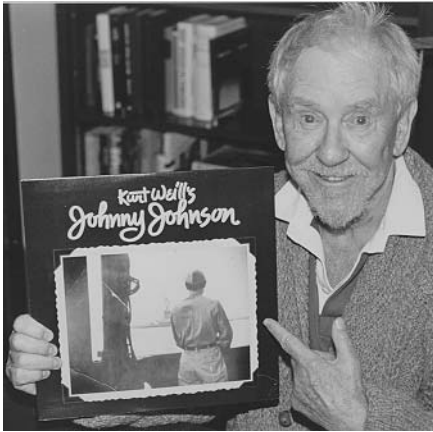
9. Grimes did not know, until I told her last year, that it was Lenya who had recommended her.

10. For a performing edition, I would propose to restore the original line and move a few others around: "And now Jimmy's away and he may have to stay" becomes "he's sorry but he can't stay... so what else can I say?" so as to make the rhyme work.

11. Marc Blitzstein, "Weill Scores for Johnny Johnson," *Modern Music* (November–December 1936) 14, no. 1: 44.

12. Minna Lederman, "Memories of Marc Blitzstein: Music's Angry Man," *Show* 4, no. 6: 18ff.

Remembering Burgess Meredith (1907–1997)



Seated at Kurt Weill's desk in the Weill-Lenya Research Center, Burgess Meredith displays the reissue of his recording of *Johnny Johnson*, 1987. Photo: Robert McCann

Actor Burgess Meredith died at his home in Malibu, California on 9 September 1997 at the age of 89. He was a virtuosic actor, equally comfortable as romantic lead, comic, or villain in a wide range of media including stage, film, television, and radio. Highlights of his sixty-year career include *Winterset* (the first of three plays written for him by Maxwell Anderson, 1936); *Of Mice and Men* (film,

1939), *Liliom* (Broadway play, 1940), *Diary of a Chambermaid* (film [writer and director], 1946), *Day of the Locust* (film [Oscar nominee in 1975]); *Rocky* (film and three sequels, 1976), and *Grumpy Old Men* (1993). He made many guest appearances on television in the 1960s on shows such as *The Twilight Zone*, *Rawhide*, *The Naked City*, and *Wagon Train* and became popular with a new generation of viewers playing the Penguin in the *Batman* series. He was also a noted Shakespearean actor, served as president of Actors Equity, worked as a writer and director, survived blacklisting in the 1950s by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and even made several appearances with the Irish musical group The Chieftains. His distinctive voice sold Skippy peanut butter and United Airlines tickets.

During the 1940s, Meredith lived in New City, New York, not far from Weill and Lenya, and he describes his personal and professional ties to them (some as “missed opportunities”) in his autobiography, *So Far, So Good* (Little, Brown, 1994). For instance, he was cast as Crooked Finger Jack in the 1933 Broadway production of *Threepenny Opera*, tried out for *Johnny Johnson* but was rejected by the Group Theatre as an “upstart,” and left *Knickerbocker Holiday* when the part of Brom became overshadowed by that of Stuyvesant. But he narrated the first radio broadcast of *Ballad of Magna Carta* and commissioned Weill to provide the music for *Salute to France*, a propaganda film he made during World War II for the United States Office of War Information. He also collaborated with Weill on *Davy Crockett*, a musical that was never completed. In the 1950s he sang “Johnny’s Song” on the first recording of *Johnny Johnson*, a work that captured his imagination.

Burgess Meredith remained friends with Weill and Lenya throughout their lives and later was a frequent visitor to the Kurt Weill Foundation. He participated in the 1983 Kurt Weill Conference at Yale University and, in 1988, purchased and donated to the Weill-Lenya Research Center an important collection of letters and documents related to Caspar and Erika Neher.

. . . remembering Lenya

Memories of Lenya—For Her 100th Birthday *Written by Burgess Meredith in 1996*

It is difficult to picture Lotte Lenya in a centennial celebration. I think the notion would make her smile—or maybe she’d resent it—hers is an eternally youthful spirit.

When I was trying out a production of *Johnny Johnson* many summers ago in Aspen, Colorado, I telephoned Lenya every week, and she never mentioned the frustrations of the past—she talked about the future. She was enthusiastic about our experiments there and made no remarks like, “I hope to God this one works out, Burgess.”

Kurt entered my life, indirectly, when I first became aware of his music, which seemed to me unworldly and wonderful. Its uncanny effect haunts me to this day.

It was 1933 and I had the small role of Crooked Finger Jack in the first American production of *The 3–Penny Opera*, while Kurt was still in Germany. I was happy to be in my first Broadway show, and to hear Weill’s abrasive music.

But I was lured away to a larger part in another show. Then a couple of years later I tried out for a part in *Johnny Johnson*—but I was turned down.

Determined to meet the man who wrote this fascinating music, I tracked him down. We hit it off immediately and were friends until his death—and through Kurt I met Lenya.

Our friendship had many facets—not only did we share professional projects, we were neighbors in Rockland County for some of our happiest times—and it even survived differences of opinion on occasion.

Volatile as their relationship was, eventually Kurt and Lenya settled down and were happy—a complete change. When I first knew them I didn’t consider they had a serious marriage, any more than the two or three marriages that I had gone through were serious.

But they settled down more than any of us, surrounded by American antiques, a brook flowing by, in a serene domestic framework.

At one point we sat quietly together on his porch on South Mountain Road, and I said to him that my life was being pulled apart while his seemed to be settling down. He said he was glad of his good fortune, because he knew, given time, he would have Lenya all to himself. And, in fact, he did.

His death was a deep loss to me, and I drove to their home to share in a gentle wake, with just a handful of close friends. We sat there crying and laughing and drinking to Kurt, and when it was time to go to bed Lenya said to me, “Would you sleep in Kurt’s bed tonight? Just stay there, you know, so it won’t be lonely in the house tonight? Nan Huston is sleeping here and the Caniffs will stay, and a couple of other people. I don’t want to be alone.” So I stayed so that I too could keep Kurt just a little longer.

Lenya is known to the world for her artistry, but I treasure the personal memory of her friendship.

Books

Von der Zeitoper zur Broadway Opera: Kurt Weill und die Idee des musikalischen Theaters

by Heinz Geuen

Schliengen: Edition Argus, 1997. 343 p.
ISBN 3-931264-02-5

The appearance of a 350-page book on Kurt Weill as the opening volume of a new series entitled “Sonus—Schriften zur Musik” (edited by Andreas Ballstaedt) certainly demands attention. In publishing his dissertation, Heinz Geuen has put forth a study whose title, *Von der Zeitoper zur Broadway Opera*, echoes the mottoes of previous publications on Weill: pairings such as Kurfürstendamm–Broadway or Berlin–New York come to mind, if not a “composer in a divided world.” However, readers who are hoping for a comprehensive study of all of Weill’s theatrical music—which the title might suggest—will be disappointed; a discussion of Weill’s American stage works, for example, does not begin until page 302. Rather, the subtitle and especially the preface provide a clear statement of the author’s intentions: “Previous studies display a historico-philological orientation, and thus they focus—apart from biographical research—primarily on formal and stylistic aspects of the music.” Instead of contributing to such criticism, Geuen intends to “interpret the characteristics of Weill’s musical language, which were developed in Germany as well as in the United States, as they pertain to their intended goal.” For Geuen, “the interpretation of the musical material’s contextual function” leads to the “heart of Weill’s compositional identity, which in its various facets is firmly rooted in an idea of *Gebrauchsmusik*” (p. 9). While this approach is not wholly new, it is certainly underrepresented in Weill scholarship. As a result, this book makes a genuine contribution to the field and is a rewarding experience to read as well.

In the first and largest of his four chapters Geuen explores Weill’s socio-musical background in Europe, locating his influences in the avant-garde, expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, jazz, and popular stage genres such as revue, operetta, and cabaret. The vastness of this undertaking confines Geuen to a “condensed portrayal” (p. 10), in which he gives a brief survey of the standard literature in each of the fields he considers to have influenced his subject. Weill’s understanding of both “popular” and “artistic” phenomena was the basis for his rich and diverse musical language, as Geuen rightly observes. Weill’s use of popular idioms has caused a number of apologetic authors to “insulate [him] from the leading figures of the *Kleinkunst* and revue scene in the Weimar Republic,” a fact that Geuen dismisses as a “wrongheaded ‘rescuing’ of the composer for so-called serious art” (p. 64). Geuen convincingly argues that attempts to judge Weill’s work from the standpoint of an autonomous aesthetic—as Adorno did most prominently—are bound to fail.

Geuen’s examples illustrating Weill’s own uncertainty about his aesthetic position are not always well chosen. Sensing a “willful perseverance” to maintain the authenticity of his scores and “accepting their unauthorized commercial exploitation at the same time” (p. 88), Geuen mentions as an example of the latter a recording of *Knickerbocker Holiday* (AEI 1148) “produced during Weill’s

lifetime,” with “mutilating cuts” and a “clearly deviating, sweeter orchestration” (p. 116). Apparently Geuen is unaware that the recording—first released in the mid-1980s—combines two different radio shows, neither of which was ever intended to match the theater version. It appears that Weill tried to protect the identity of his works solely in connection with stage productions; the commercial exploitation that he not only tolerated but actively pursued seems to have been necessary to define his success, especially in the Broadway milieu.

In subsequent chapters the author traces Weill’s career-long development of an overall musico-dramaturgical concept in his works for the stage. Geuen discusses *Der Zar läßt sich fotografieren* and *Royal Palace*, along with Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* and Hindemith’s *Neues vom Tage*, to argue that *Zeitoper*, as a symptom of a greater crisis in opera, presented the necessary context for Weill to develop and expand his theatrical skills. In contrast to his colleagues, Weill’s special dealing with the “‘flash in the pan’ *Zeitoper*” (p. 224) is seen in Geuen’s study as a key to his later works, particularly the ones composed in the United States. The third chapter, which is dedicated to Weill’s theories of musical theater, discusses the influence of Busoni (without considering, alas, Tamara Levitz’s dissertation, *Teaching New Classically: Busoni’s Master Class in Composition, 1921–1924*) and the different concepts of *Verfremdung* and *Gestus* held by Weill and Brecht respectively. Here Geuen gives a clear and detailed analysis of this often inadequately treated issue.

The final chapter provides four analytical essays in which Geuen illustrates his theory of continuity in Weill’s concept of musical theater. Based on his observation that Weill’s musical language employs “every possible means” (p. 282) to serve his dramaturgical purposes, Geuen analyzes parts of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, *Lady in the Dark*, and *Street Scene*. A laxity toward the Broadway environment in which Weill worked may be discerned in Geuen’s discussion of the rumba finale (“Girl of the Moment”) of the Glamour Dream from *Lady in the Dark*, in which he notes, “the music of this Brazilian carnival might stem from the pen of Jerome Kern, Oskar [sic] Hammerstein, [or] perhaps remotely from that of George Gershwin” (p. 302). Aside from the fact that he recruits (and misspells the name of) one of Broadway’s foremost lyricists as a composer (throughout the book Geuen also misspells the author of *Street Scene* as “Elmar” Rice), this list reads like superficial name-dropping, since neither Kern nor George Gershwin is particularly known for the composition of rumbas. Truly regrettable, however, is the absence of references to specific secondary literature, such as William Thornhill’s and David Kilroy’s studies on *Street Scene*.

Such lapses, however, do not detract seriously from the merit of Geuen’s study and the overall favorable impression it leaves. Geuen’s theoretical stance is clearly delineated, and, because his definition of *Gebrauchsmusik* (and the arguments derived from it) follow Weill’s own writings closely, they do not fall victim to the perils of a relativism usually inherent in functional theories. The continuity of Weill’s musico-dramaturgical concept, which Geuen carefully and convincingly reveals, is essential to any discussion of Weill’s music. One of the questions that Geuen’s study now raises is how to approach those elements of Weill’s music which are unrelated to contextual function.

Finally, it should not pass unmentioned that the quality of the printing is superb and the book is also well-bound. The lack of an index is puzzling, considering the otherwise professional presentation.

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Books

The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich

by Michael Kater

New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 327 p.
ISBN 0-19-509620-7

A recent outpouring of English-language publications on music in the Third Reich is a hopeful sign that the relative neglect of music in scholarship on the Nazi state is beginning to be remedied. Yet many of these new publications have ignored important work on the other arts and on Nazi cultural policy in general, as Michael Kater rightly bemoans in the introduction to his *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich*. They have done little more than borrow generously from Fred Prieberg's research (*Musik im NS-Staat*, 1982) and uncritically adopt his prejudices, sticking as well to an old, Hollywood-reinforced image of Nazi Germany as a rigid, highly organized, repressive system in which the daily musical fare consisted of a strict diet of military marches, anti-Semitic fight songs, and Wagner operas.

Michael Kater's investigation of the functioning of art music in the Third Reich remedies the shortcomings of recent attempts. First of all, Kater ventures far beyond the research of his predecessors, bringing to his investigation a well-grounded understanding of the workings of Nazi society and an up-to-date familiarity with the growing field of Nazi cultural history and new directions in musicology. (His discussion of Kurt Weill, for example, gives due consideration to the debate over his alleged compositional metamorphosis after his emigration.) Most important, Kater dares to challenge long-held assumptions, yielding a representation of musical life in Nazi Germany as a highly complex set of circumstances governed by a multitude of variables.

Kater is no stranger to research on Nazi Germany. As Distinguished Research Professor of History at York University, he is the author of a wide range of authoritative studies on the Third Reich, including such topics as the cultural endeavors of the SS, right-wing student movements, the composition of the Nazi party and the medical profession. Kater has more recently turned his attention to music, first with his impressive 1992 study of jazz in Nazi Germany (*Different Drummers*), and now with *The Twisted Muse*, the second of a projected music trilogy, to be followed by his forthcoming *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits*.

The Twisted Muse provides a much-needed balance to views of musical life in Nazi Germany. Rather than submitting to the common practice of isolating the Nazi period as an aberration in Germany's otherwise impressive cultural history, Kater points to the many continuities in music practices inherited from the Weimar Republic, especially in his discussion of the Hitler Youth. Another tendency in earlier studies was to give an illusion of total government control, an image invoked defensively after the war to rationalize the conciliatory gestures that many prominent musicians had made to the Nazi regime. Kater delegitimizes such claims with numerous demonstrations of laxity in cultural policy and of constant in-fighting among Nazi potentates. Finally, as he demonstrated in *Different Drummers*, Kater convincingly argues that the Nazi regime exercised a pragmatic policy of balancing suppression with tolerance, bending its ideological principles rather than offending popular tastes.

These insights are important for interpreting the experiences of musicians and composers, which Kater proceeds to do in numerous

case studies of individuals. Perhaps his most important contribution to the literature, these studies reveal the variety of conditions that faced those who tried to function in Nazi society. A wide range of personalities populates this study, from the unknown struggling violinist to the director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Taken together, these snapshots of individuals, each with a different story to tell, vividly recreate the system's crass arbitrariness.

The Twisted Muse also serves to illuminate the complexity of determining guilt or innocence. Kater's vast experience as a historian of the Nazi era puts him in a position to interpret political behavior authoritatively, carefully distinguishing between routine practices and overt political acts. Documenting one's Aryan lineage, for example, was a routine requirement, but joining the Nazi party exceeded normal expectations. Kater's thorough investigations, utilizing archival sources, contemporary literature, and interviews, clear up misconceptions and ambiguities surrounding several well-known figures who have been subjects of lengthy debates. He enhances some of these portraits by looking into pre-1933 backgrounds, showing, for instance, that the bourgeois upbringing of both Strauss and Furtwängler naturally inclined them to oppose the Weimar Republic and imbued each with a healthy dose of cultural anti-Semitism. The investigation of Strauss is particularly informative, interpreting the composer's actions within the framework of the Nazi hierarchy, shedding new light on administrative causes for his resignation as president of the Reich Music Chamber, and unearthing shocking revelations about the unusual cruelties meted out to his Jewish relatives. More surprising are the facts about Fritz Busch, long admired as an opponent of the Nazi regime. We learn that Busch was actually driven out of Germany against the wishes of leading Nazis because of personal intrigues circulated against him by Nazis in Saxony that even Hitler and Göring could not thwart.

While Kater draws some general conclusions regarding musical styles, it must be noted that the study is weighted more toward "the musicians" than "their music" and should be read with these expectations. Still, the author's observations on musical trends show convincingly that despite its relentless propaganda, the Nazi regime never devised clear guidelines for distinguishing between "good" and "bad" music, i.e. "German" and "Jewish." By disassociating an individual's compositional style from the degree of success in the Third Reich, the portraits of composers further serve to dismantle any notions of a consistent Nazi musical aesthetic. Thus adherence to Romanticism did not guarantee success for Pfitzner, nor did experiments with serialism jeopardize the careers of Paul von Klenau and Winfried Zillig. Rather, as each case illustrates, a composer's fate depended on a certain degree of talent, fortuitous political connections, and sheer luck.

The Twisted Muse offers crucial challenges to earlier assumptions about the struggles of musicians in the Nazi state. As Kater observes, Nazi leaders valued the importance of music in Germany's cultural history. Toward that end, it seems, they acknowledged that creative artists needed to be nurtured and granted more personal and political freedom than the average citizen. The Nazi state also considered itself a modern state and sought out a brand of modernism in music that would represent the new Germany. A mere revival of Baroque or Romantic styles would not, in the long run, fulfill their goals. These important observations will encourage new ways of looking at musical modernism. They will, perhaps, also encourage researchers and musicians to take a closer look at specific works that succeeded in Nazi Germany, without harboring presumptions of their artistic limitations and regressive tendencies.

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Books

Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith

edited and translated from the German by Geoffrey Skelton

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 255p.
ISBN 0-300-06451-9

A new book of selected letters by Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) reveals the enigmatic personality of a composer negotiating his way through the routes of exile from Germany, the challenges of maintaining American citizenship while living in the United States and in Europe, and the complexities of his own international reception during the last ten years of his life. Letters are personal testimonies of the people who write them. Such a self-evident observation takes on new meaning in the age of the computer, when instant corrections and deletions diminish the opportunity to understand a writer's creative process. A welcome gift to music lovers, this volume is also a comment on the passage of time and a tribute to the art of writing letters.

Geoffrey Skelton has compiled quite a remarkable collection of primary source material that relates broadly to the lives of German exiled composers living in the United States during the Second World War. Nearly four-fifths of the book is selected from Hindemith's letters written up till the end of World War II; a substantial portion of that segment comes from the Weimar and World War II periods. Skelton can justify these proportions for several reasons. First, the balance reflects Hindemith's letter-writing output between 1913 and 1963. Second—and especially of interest to readers concerned with Weill and other contemporaneous immigrant composers—the selection gives a clear picture of the stress Hindemith suffered during the Third Reich and from the experience of exile.

What emerges quite clearly from these letters is a picture of the United States as a haven away from Europe at that time. The correspondence between Hindemith and his wife, Gertrud, during his three concert tours of the United States preceding his immigration (1937, 1938, and 1939) is filled with detailed, journal-like entries. His observations of American cities and their people illuminates the frame of mind that prepared him for immigration. A letter to Gertrud dated 4 April 1937 (during his first concert tour as a violist in the United States) reveals a great admiration for his seventy-three-year-old uncle, Gustav Hindemith, who built his home on a farmstead “gathering the bricks and boards one by one” (p. 99). Contacts with people in music circles throughout this country no doubt further enhanced the optimism he felt because of his first experiences with the United States. He relates (again to Gertrud) a meeting with Oliver Strunk at the Library of Congress, of having found “the necessary points of contact” upon learning that he (Hindemith) was on the panel that failed Strunk when he took the entrance exam in composition at the Berlin Hochschule (p. 100).

Beyond relating the purely anecdotal, Hindemith's observations about his interaction with others come across with understated humor and, at times, even with slight sarcasm. He observed that Nadia Boulanger created the feeling in the United States “that she

is engaged in some kind of musical politics” (p. 103), and that Stravinsky, “followed by his satellite [Samuel] Dushkin . . . was telling everyone that *Der Schwanendreher* [Hindemith's composition] is an immensely important piece” (p. 103).

By far the most lengthy correspondence in this book is between Hindemith and his publishers (Schott of Mainz and Associated Music Publishers in New York) and their representatives. Another frequent recipient of letters was Oscar Cox, Hindemith's champion and personal lawyer in Washington, D.C. Though Hindemith lived in Switzerland for the last ten years of his life, he never gave up his American citizenship. Cox became the conduit for Hindemith's expressions of dissatisfaction at receiving little support for concert appearances and events in his honor in foreign cities, especially when American diplomats remained conspicuously absent. In an extended letter dated 13 April 1955, Hindemith explains to Cox why he is “forced to do my work here in Europe” (p. 227). This statement comes after Hindemith had given a concert in Cologne attended by the President of West Germany. “It was rather embarrassing not to see any of the Americans, not even a third rate cultural attaché . . . and claim that the successful conductor was something American” (p. 227).

The anguish of adopting a new homeland, returning to post-war Germany with great pride in things American (an attitude not reflected in this selection of letters), and having to deal with the complexities of domicile, double taxation and a conducting career in Europe (p. 227) during the 1950s and '60s, are issues that tell Hindemith's unique story. He never became an icon in American society as some immigrant composers succeeded in doing, perhaps because he refused to write for films. This intriguing issue finds little treatment in this volume.

Hindemith's own self-deprecating humor reveals most about his intensely private disposition. By definition, the publication of personal letters makes private thoughts public in a way not usually anticipated by the writer. Ironically, the process of people writing “privately” to each other in cyberspace is somewhat analogous to losing confidentiality in published correspondence. Geoffrey Skelton has taken due regard of the confidentiality factor by introducing the letters with annotations and deleting portions not pertinent to the main issue at hand. He has also done a remarkable job of translation, so that the difference between his English usage and Hindemith's own written English is only subtly evident. In the hands of Skelton, a skilled editor and writer, this selection of letters makes for an extremely readable book.

Johann Buis
Columbia College, Chicago

Performances

Street Scene

Altenburg and Gera, Germany
Landestheater Altenburg/Bühnen der Stadt Gera

Premiere: 30 March 1997 (in repertory until mid-1999)

Street Scene, Kurt Weill's "American opera," has been performed in Europe with varying success over the past four years in Munich, Ludwigshafen, Berlin, Freiburg, and Turin. The work is still a long way from becoming a repertory piece here, but it is on the verge of finding at least a niche on the continent in spite of production demands such as the huge singing cast and the ever-problematic translation from the original English. However, up to now it appears that only the landmark coproduction of the Houston Grand Opera, Theater des Westens Berlin, and Theater im Pfalzbau Ludwigshafen was able to present the work without significant shortcomings.

Considering the obstacles, the Theater Altenburg-Gera has achieved some astonishing results. An impressive and effective set, designed by Hanne Eckart, provided an appropriate frame on stage. Replete with rich details, it created a gripping and convincing atmosphere of *verismo*. By placing the tenement houses at an angle with one corner visible at the very left of the stage, the whole set gained depth and perspective, which were cleverly used by director Hubert Kross, Jr.

The Theater wisely decided not to employ its entire staff of actors and singers, instead hiring a few guest soloists. The most outstanding was the American singer Elizabeth Hagedorn, who played Anna Maurant. Both her singing and acting were truly superb, and she completely fulfilled the expectations and demands of this crucial role. One could hope for a more compatible Frank Maurant, played by Bernhard Hänsch. Although his voice was appropriate for the role, his character was not fully convincing as an ignorant, inconsiderate brute. The remaining two principals, Birgit Wesolek (Rose Maurant) and guest soloist Werner Schwarz (Sam

Kaplan) equaled the brilliance of Hagedorn.

The numerous secondary characters were very well cast and, at times, a pure delight to watch. To single out the best would require naming almost the entire cast: the Jones family, the Olsens, Hildebrands, Fiorentinos (Lippo sung by guest soloist Uwe Salzmänn). Particularly striking was Dick and Mae's jitterbug performance of "Moon-faced, Starry-eyed," danced by the production's choreographer Carlos Guillaume and Lydia Bicks-Fröhlich. A gaggle of "actors-to-be" gave such an extraordinary performance of the Children's Game at the beginning of Act II that the audience wondered whether the kids were professionals.

Hubert Kross's direction revealed aspects of the social significance of *Street Scene*. Here the use of a German translation proved to be a good decision, especially, for example, when it exposed with almost chilling realism the ridiculous yet genuine racism that still exists today. Abraham Kaplan's suggestion of a revolution surely stirred all kinds of emotions in the citizenry of former East Germany. The disadvantages of opera in translation are beyond the scope of this review, but one must note that the translated poem of Walt Whitman (in Rose and Sam's duet) at the end of Act I proved simply ineffective in German.

The generally fresh and convincing choreography went a little overboard in the scene when the two nannies are drawn to the crime scene by—oh-so-present-day—sensational newspaper reports. Regrettably, they overacted their part, turning it into a slapstick number and therefore overshadowing Hughes's words and Weill's music (which contain all the fun necessary).

The Landeskappelle Altenburg, conducted by Thomas Wicklein, performed in the pit. Although the orchestra started out quite well, over the course of the evening there were moments of imprecision and a few numbers could have been crisper.

All in all, the Theater produced a memorable *Street Scene*, one that not only did dramatic and musical justice to a difficult work, but also set a new standard for subsequent productions. Coming just two years after the fusion of the theaters of Altenburg and Gera (in Thuringia, Germany)—a fairly difficult and painful process that many subsidized theaters in former East Germany underwent because of state budget cuts—this production represents a remarkable achievement. This season, the combined Altenburg-Gera Theater has a repertoire ranging from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* to O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*. With *Street Scene* in repertory for at least another season (until mid-1999), many more people will have a chance to see the production and especially its splendid cast.

Elmar Juchem
Göttingen



The Ice Cream Sextet (Act 1). Photo: U. Reinhöfen.

Performances

One Touch of Venus

*Evanston, Illinois
Light Opera Works and Pegasus
Players (coproduction), at Cahn
Auditorium*

16–24 August 1997

There are always risks involved when an opera company tackles musical comedy. One can expect the musical, especially the vocal, qualities inherent in opera to be present, but the style, the acting, even the blocking, can become too stuffy, too heavy, too earthbound. With a show like *One Touch of Venus*, which builds witty one-liners upon a charming fantasy plot, anything earthbound is simply deadly. What should be lighter than air suddenly becomes labored and forced.

Starting with an unlikely story of a hapless barber who puts a ring on the finger of a statue and then watches her turn into a living, breathing goddess, *One Touch of Venus* requires performers who can do justice to Kurt Weill's bewitching score, sell Ogden Nash's snazzy lyrics, and punch the jokes stuffed into the script hand over fist by Nash and S.J. Perelman. This is a bright, breezy show, full of wonderful opportunities for a first-rate cast and crew to strut their stuff. Even though too much 1940's wisecracking can sound creaky, and some of the lyrics resonate with pre-feminist messages (most notably the idea that Venus "opened up her bodice" to get ahead with the male deities!), the show can still be very funny in the right hands.

Light Opera Works (a specialist in pieces like *The Merry Widow* and *Desert Song*) collaborated with Pegasus Players (which has a sterling reputation for sharp musical comedy and straight plays) in this production of *One Touch of Venus*. The reputations of these companies offered high hopes for a successful production, but the performance ultimately disappointed, with its clumsy, careless approach. Although a few things were done very well—most notably the orchestral playing and

the musical direction—the production was far from flawless.

The production values were no better than slipshod: a clumsy pull-out bed that did not close or open properly, so little smoke and mirrors that Venus's transformation was plain as day, a phone that kept ringing even after it was answered, a skirt that fell off in mid-dance and another that unravelled in mid-song, a towel that should tie a girl to a chair but barely made it around her, and a flimsy flat that was supposed to approximate a chest of drawers but instead flapped in the breeze.

The snafus ruined the extremely nice-looking costumes and set designed by Shifra Welch and Alan Donahue respectively. Welch's contributions included a terrific parade of costumes for the Artists' Ball, while Donahue offered beautifully detailed, watercolored curtains (dropped to disguise frequent scene changes), a whole bus station, and a fabulous take on

Rockefeller Center for a very effective "Forty Minutes for Lunch." Although the sets were witty, whimsical, and really added to the production, they complicated the flow of the piece enormously; director J.R. Sullivan's staging could not help but be static and stodgy. Because of the constraints of the set, sometimes the singers simply stood and sang in front of the curtains. Act I came in at an hour and forty-five minutes, which was about fifteen minutes too long. Streamlining the set changes and picking up cues would have trimmed the excess time. Although Marla Lampert's choreography worked well for the two big ballets ("Forty Minutes for Lunch" and "Venus in Ozone Heights"), the Artists' Ball, and "Doctor Crippen," the incidental choreography looked rather aimless.

Old hands from the Light Opera Works filled most of the roles. As Rodney, the humble barber whose life is turned upside-down, William Chamberlain projected a boyish manner with a truly lovely, old-fashioned tenor voice, making the "Wooden Wedding" really shine. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in mining the jokes crammed into Nash's lyrics, especially on catalog songs like "How Much I Love You" and its counterpart, "That's How Sick I Am of Love." And even though Rodney is just a regular guy, there should be more electricity, more romance, than Chamberlain finds in the role. If Chamberlain did not make the most of the lyrics, baritone John Payonk, who played the high-toned art connoisseur Whitelaw Savory, positively muddled them, despite his fine voice. But Payonk pulled off a charming caper at the end of "Foolish Heart" and swirled a mean cape at the



Susan Prischmann (Venus) and William Chamberlain (Rodney) in the Chicago Light Opera Works' *One Touch of Venus*. Photo: Rich Foreman.

end of Act I. He displayed good chemistry with Susan Prischmann (Venus), and Breisa Youman (his snappy secretary).

As the leading lady, Prischmann made a very pretty, graceful Venus, and she gave impressive, romantic interpretations of the classics "Speak Low" and "That's Him." An amiable performer, Prischmann did the best job of balancing singing and acting, as well as garnering laughs. Thomas A. Shea stood out as a pea-brained hoodlum named Stanley. He, too, had the comic timing to sell the jokes.

Still, the orchestra rose to be the star of the evening. In the intimate confines of the Cahn Auditorium, it sounded wonderful. Conductor Guy Victor Bordo navigated the score beautifully, emphasizing the lush strings and sparkling percussion of Weill's original orchestration.

This *Venus* never reached the Ozone Heights it promised. Although Weill's score sounded great, the effortless charm of the book and lyrics became dull by the flagging pace or drowned in a sea of miscues. *Venus* needed a lighter touch all around.

Julie Kistler
Chicago



Program cover for this year's BBC Proms concerts in London.

Performances

Mahagonny Songspiel and *Die sieben Todsünden*

London
BBC Proms Concert
Royal Albert Hall

3 August 1997

Weill is gradually becoming a regular at the annual BBC Promenade Concerts in London. Twenty-nine years ago, an English-language *Seven Deadly Sins* (with the new translation by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman) and the Second Symphony were the first Weill pieces ever to be programmed in the Proms. The 1968 performance, with soloist Evelyn Lear and conducted by Sir Colin Davis, restored *The Seven Deadly Sins* to the soprano key in which Weill had originally written in 1933. The landmark concert was well-received by press and public, although the music seemed difficult and obscure to some people then.

This is the fourth time *Die sieben Todsünden* has been heard at the Proms (Maria Ewing and Anja Silja sang it in concert in the intervening seasons). However, it is the first time a staging has been attempted. Marie McLaughlin, well-known as Jenny in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, plays the singing Anna very well. However, the staging by John Abulafia forces her into a particularly violent reading of the part, frequently striking her sister and throwing her to the floor. I do not believe the music suggests such violence, nor do I read it in Brecht's text. Surely Anna the singer is half of the same person as Anna the dancer. Although Anna the singer keeps her eye on all chances to advance herself and her dancing sister, she is weary of the world. She should be sympathetic to her sister's emotional responses. Donald George, Jeffrey Lloyd-Roberts, Jonathan Veira, and Nicholas Cavalier are effective in portraying the comic elements of the family quartet. The conductor, Anne Manson (the first woman ever to conduct at the Salzburg Festival), showed a fine response to Weill's music, despite the staging.

Well-attended by young standees, *Die sieben Todsünden* formed the climax of an

afternoon concert which began with a sequence of cabaret songs by Eisler, Hollaender, Nelson, and Ilse Weber. Unfortunately, the Royal Albert Hall (with its 5000 seats sparsely filled for this performance) is the least suitable place in the city for lieder or small-scale song recitals. (Fischer-Dieskau did once give an all-Goethe-Wolf program here to remarkable effect.) It is quite an achievement that the singers managed to get the words across—Jeffrey Lloyd-Roberts was especially good in Nelson's "Peter," and Jonathan Veira had a good stab at "Das Nachtgespenst." Elena Ferrari bravely essayed "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss" from *The Blue Angel*. The revelation of this segment of the performance was Marianne Rorholm's performance of Ilse Weber's "Brief an mein Kind." This was composed by Weber as a letter to her son in Sweden when she was already in the concentration camp at Terezin. She died at Auschwitz in 1944. Her son eventually published the song in 1978.

Mahagonny Songspiel, which concluded the first half of the program, was the most successful segment of this afternoon concert. Incidentally, *Mahagonny Songspiel* has also been presented four times at the Proms, in 1972, 1987, 1993, and now. I recall that the two earlier performances were amplified, while the latter two were not.

There remains a segment of the musical public unfamiliar with Weill's work. Two well-traveled American concertgoers in their late 40s sat near me during the concert. They were intrigued by the works and told me this was their first hearing of any of Weill's music. I was on the verge of telling them how well-known these works have become, and that they need a smaller auditorium than the Royal Albert Hall to make their mark, but I changed my mind. Thanks to the program-planners at the Proms, more people now have the opportunity to come face to face with Weill and his music.

Patrick O'Connor
London

Recordings

The Seven Deadly Sins

Teresa Stratas, soprano; Frank Kelley and Howard Haskin, tenors; Herbert Perry, baritone; Peter Rose, bass

Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Lyon

Kent Nagano, conductor

Erato 0630-17068-2

The success of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's version of *Everyman* (1911) suggested that there might be a market for modernist extravaganzas in the domain of morality plays. By 1916, Sibelius had written forty minutes of rich incidental music for Hofmannsthal's text; by 1927, Max Reinhardt had produced a lavish "super-cathedral" version at the Century Theater, New York, with Hollywood-style golden angels, antiphonal choirs, and organ music. Mammon, defeated by Good Works in his quest for Everyman's soul, had clearly moved on to the role of impresario.

The Seven Deadly Sins, a *ballet chanté* first presented in Paris in 1933 with music by Weill, scenario by Edward James and Boris Kochno, poetry by Brecht, and choreography by Balanchine, represented a still further stage in the decadence of the morality play. The seven deadly sins play no explicit role in Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, or in the Dutch and English *Everymans* that began to be published in 1495. But there are many morality plays in which the deadly sins are important cast members, such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, where they gang up on Mankind to seduce him to bad behavior. The joke of *The Seven Deadly Sins* is that it is a morality play mockingly presented to the glory of Mammon; the deadly sins are not deadly because they keep the soul from God, but because they keep the soul from acquiring money. Sloth interferes with wage earning; Lust makes Anna eager to sleep with a poor man, instead of the rich man who will pay for it.

Weill and Brecht have received due credit for their excellent work, but perhaps Edward James's contribution has been a bit neglected. James wanted to produce an important spectacle to flatter his estranged wife, the lead dancer Tilly Losch. But James was also a surrealist poet, and *The Seven Deadly Sins* forms part of the history of French surrealism, in addition to its bet-

ter-known role in the history of Brechtian epic theater. The fractured stage, in which sung narration and dance are co-present and yet isolated, can be discussed as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, but it can also be discussed in terms of such surrealist music-spectacles as *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), in which Cocteau sat inside a giant phonograph and read his text aloud. (Weill and James originally tried to enlist Cocteau for *The Seven Deadly Sins* and only turned to Brecht after Cocteau refused.) James belonged to the world of *Les Six* and surrealism; Poulenc set James's own poetry in *Sécheresses* (1937), a choral cantata that remains the most striking musical equivalent ever made to the evacuated surrealist landscapes of Dali or Tanguy.

The present recording of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, conducted by a specialist in modern French music and played by a French orchestra, is perhaps more attentive to the surreal aspects than any previous one. Where most performances sound rigorous and evil, Nagano's sounds insinuating, eager to please. "Pride," for example, has never sounded more humble: Weill's waltz-tunes seem tinselled, light-footed, almost Gounod-like. Similarly, "Sloth" is unusually nimble: the male quartet, representing Anna's family, declaims its motto on the virtue of hard work in a clipped, almost mincing style. "Gluttony" begins austere, as it should, but when the family members recall the delicious food that Anna (who needs to be thin to keep her job in the entertainment industry) no longer gets to eat, they audibly swoon with the sheer voluptuousness of chicken and asparagus—they in effect impersonate the sin of Gluttony, which they are ostensibly urging Anna to avoid. Nagano is sensitive to the dancing qualities of the ballet, and by keeping the textures light and the pitch oriented to the treble, not the bass, he reminds us how thoroughly the music contradicts the story. Weill seems determined to prove that he never sins, no matter what sort of mess Anna makes of her life. A surrealist theater is a theater of dissonance, in which music, spectacle, and text proceed along fully independent lines. This recording of the *ballet chanté* never tries to homogenize the ingredients, never makes the music explain the words.

This is not to say that you should buy this recording. The performance, for all its delicacy, is slow—sometimes amazingly slow. And Stratas's performance requires some indulgence. Perhaps we owe her this



indulgence, for no singer has done more to advance the cause of modernist music—her Lulu, her *Mahagonny* Jenny, have been necessary to hear. To remember her Stratas can do, I compared her *Seven Deadly Sins* with her 1981 recording of *Complainte de la Seine* (1934), one of the most intense and lyrical performances I have ever heard of anything. It provides a useful comparison, because Weill re-used the march tune of "Envy" to set a French *chanson* by Maurice Magre—a rather surrealistic text concerning the stuff found at the bottom of a river, such as old rings, abortions, and hands chopped off by propellers. In the *chanson*, Stratas's line is firm; her voice rises to a sort of dark elation. Stratas, like Lenya, has one great gift necessary to sing Weill, the gift for plain-speaking. She trusts the words and the music, and is never merely eloquent.

Some of these virtues persist in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, recorded in 1993, when Stratas was nearly 55 years old—Lenya recorded the piece when she was 57. There are moments when her old genius for piercing emphasis comes through—she makes something of the detail (in "Lust") about the ass worth more than a little factory—but her performance of the "Envy" march, after a strong beginning, is listless, and her voice cracks sadly at the end of many of the phrases. I will keep this disc, perhaps mostly for the sake of the lithe and balletic performance of the Symphony No.2 that accompanies it—an ideal coupling, in that the Symphony shares so many turns of phrase with the ballet. But there is no substitute for steadiness of voice, in Weill's music or elsewhere, and I find myself entertaining the surreal wish that Weill had married, instead of Lenya, Kirsten Flagstad.

Daniel Albright
University of Rochester

Recordings

The Threepenny Opera

Original Cast Recording of the Donmar Warehouse Production: Tom Hollander, Macheath; Tom Mannion, Mr. Peachum; Beverley Klein, Mrs. Peachum; Sharon Small, Polly Peachum; Tara Hugo, Jenny; Simon Dormandy, Tiger Brown; Natasha Bain, Lucy; Gary Yershon, conductor

Jay CDJAY 1244

After a few honorable tries, including Weill's own attempt to get a Brecht-less rewrite off the ground, *Die Dreigroschenoper* finally became a hit with English-speaking critics and theatergoers in 1954. Marc Blitzstein did the adaptation and translations—achieving the impossible by thrilling both Brecht and Lenya—for a Greenwich Village show that ran for 2,707 performances. That famed Theater de Lys version, as well as the musicological culture that has grown up around Weill, might blind us to the possibility of taking the work even further from the worlds of Brecht and Weill. (We should remember that Lenya refused to give the Blitzstein an “authorized version” imprimatur, and Weill himself anticipated rewriting and adapting the work for non-German stages.) There's another danger in the apparent definitiveness of the best-selling MGM record of the unpublished Blitzstein “edition.” MGM executives forced a radical cleanup of the work's mores and language, leaving behind a *Threepenny* that had—linguistically if not musically—been tamed, toned down, and scrubbed behind the ears.

In December 1994, director Phyllida Lloyd opened her fairly dramatic transformation at the Donmar Warehouse, Covent Garden. She respected Brecht's precept that *Dreigroschenoper* is “inseparably tied to a climate of crisis” by translating the scenario to Britain at the accession of William V in 2001: a world of AIDS, non-stop surveillance cameras, beggars demanding prosthetics, and public executions turned into TV game shows. The *Sunday Times* called it a “sizzling, cheerfully nasty pro-

duction of bruised but pugnacious sexuality.”

Certainly Jeremy Sams's lyric translations—clever and biting, but respectful of Weill's music as well as Brecht's imagery and scansion—bring the scenario up to date with plenty of four-letter words and other bows to post-Cold-War rancor. (The *Financial Times* critic thought Sams's cynicisms made the evening “Brecht-heavy.”) He also updates things with a raciness at which Brecht only hinted. In the “Barbara Song,” for example, Brecht's “Ja, da musst' ich mich doch einfach hinlegen” becomes “yes, you're sometimes glad to pull your panties down.” With references to “dark-ies” and other such British colloquialisms, his translating of Brecht into twenty-first-century England will mystify many Americans. “Cannon Song” begins “John was a squaddy and Jim was a toff, and both of them behaved like wankers. . . .” (I hope I have spelled these words correctly; the recording includes no printed texts.)

Likewise, the array of accents employed by the cast on the recording hints at all sorts of London castes and social hierarchies that will fall on deaf ears in the States: Polly has an Irish brogue, Peachum is Scottish, and Mrs. Peachum London-Jewish. I take it on the authority of one London reviewer that Mackie sounds like he hails from Essex.

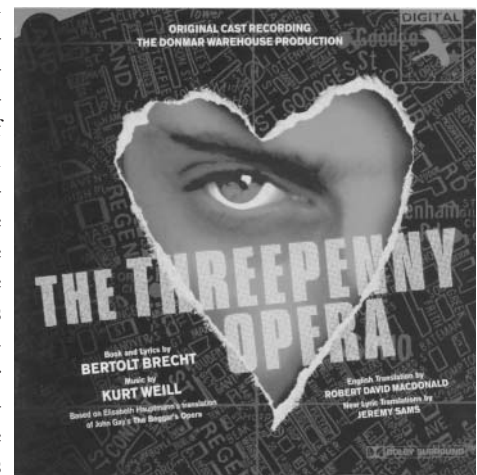
Sams has said that he wanted the audience to forget about feats of translation. Any winks and games of “let's see how he renders such and such” are soon forgotten in this well-conceived and very well-sung recording. From the purely musical angle, things are spot on. The Broadwayish voices are an antidote to the dull, studio-bound operaticisms on the London-Decca recording. All the principals combine modern musicality with the kind of huskily verismo delivery heard on the old Columbia/Sony set. The only miscalculation is the Mackie, who sounds more like a slightly dumb, small-time hood than the magisterial and charming Macheath of the Pabst film (or Sting in Michael Feingold's Broadway rewrite!). Both instrumentalists and singers take a personal, vernacular freedom with Weill's rhythms. The exciting and hard-pressed overture carried me away immediately and the tango rhythms

are sexy. The studio sound is open and substantial, suggesting a large-ish theater acoustic with voices and instruments alive, present, and impeccably balanced. No dialogues or monologues are included and the part of the Ausrufer is entirely omitted.

The recording respects Weill's orchestrations, but there have been changes made to the score. Yershon's liner note spells these out, indicating that most are transpositions to accommodate singers. Two alterations are substantial. The “What's the Point Song” (a streamlining of Brecht's “Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens”) is performed entirely a cappella. A very big change, but not one without historical precedent, is that the “Flick-Knife Song” (the “Moritat”) is slowed down and moved to the middle of the work as a pre-intermission closer, its instrumentation re-distributed among the verses. This perennial is thereby quite destroyed, at least for those who grew up on the Lenya recordings.

This new recording is a necessity for anyone wanting a *Threepenny* in English and with barbs intact. Still, it remains to be seen whether Sams's Britishisms will annoy American listeners or just take on more local color with further hearings. And I hope someone will some day do the work necessary to re-record the Blitzstein version with an unexpurgated text.

Arved Ashby
Ohio State University



Recordings

To The Soul

Thomas Hampson sings the poetry of Walt Whitman

with Craig Rutenberg, piano

EMI 7243 5 55028 2 7

Recording includes "Dirge for Two Veterans" by Kurt Weill.

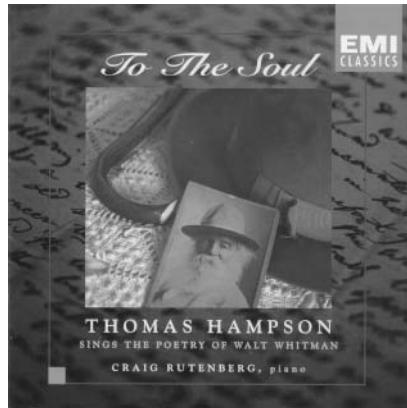
There have been hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of musical settings of Walt Whitman's poetry. Still, the recently released "To the Soul," featuring baritone Thomas Hampson with pianist Craig Rutenberg, may be the first compilation of its kind. The disc includes more than an hour's worth of recorded Whitman settings by American, British, and German composers. It is heartening that EMI is willing to support a project with less than widespread commercial appeal and that an artist of Thomas Hampson's stature is willing to participate. This addition to the catalogue will certainly delight fans of Mr. Hampson's previous recorded explorations of Americana and should be especially rewarding to the few who, like American song specialist Paul Sperry, have themselves delved into this repertoire and presented programs of Whitman settings.

However, "To the Soul" will not become a best-seller, nor should it. Many of the included songs are clear examples of problems that can arise in setting poetry to music. A number of them are little more than pseudo-recitations, with the piano articulating a steady stream of chords, one per beat, while the voice intones the text. This approach may facilitate comprehension of the words, but its musical value is open to question. Fauré used such a texture to great effect in his later songs, particularly in *Diane, Séléné* (1921), which describes a quiet moonlit scene. (Ned Rorem's *Look down, fair moon* (1957), included here, features the device too.) But this ornamented chorale texture so pervades the settings collected in "To the Soul" that its effect is greatly diminished. Perhaps Whitman's texts require little embellishment beyond simple recitation; but if they are unable to hold their own aside a characteristic musical gesture, maybe they should not be set to music at all.

The most successful settings on the disc are those which abbreviate or condense the Whitman originals. William

Neidlinger's *Memories of Lincoln* (1920) selects eighteen lines of text from three separate poems; Robert Strassburg's *Prayer of Columbus* (1993) selects fifteen lines from a sixty-five-line work. Although both exhibit a hint of romantic excess, they are gripping songs with musical interest.

Another strong dramatic scene is Kurt Weill's "Dirge for Two Veterans" (1942) from *Four Walt Whitman Songs*. Setting ten of the eleven original four-line stanzas, Weill manages to maintain continuity without resorting to blatant sound effects or sudden dramatic shifts. Drums and bugles are common presences in Whitman settings, and there are a few in evidence here, but also apparent is a distinctively American harmonic palette. This master of the theater keeps the listener engaged in all forty lines of text, with ample but expert recycling of musical material providing a



sense of development and continuity. The distinct voice exhibited by "Dirge for Two Veterans" sets it apart from many of the other works on this disc. Whitman the populist sounds more at home in the theatrical style of Weill than in the rarefied world of art song.

Of the more contemplative texts, Hindemith's "Sing on There in the Swamp," from his set of *Nine English Songs* (1944) (and also used in his *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd: Requiem for Those We Love* (1946)), stands out. Rhythmic ostinato serves here to create a concise outline of scene, thought, and emotion.

Some of the Whitman texts are virtually without conventional poetic characteristics; their prosaic style defies musical setting, even when the topic is song itself. Take the following example from *Calamus* (1860, 1867): "Sometimes with one I love I

fill myself with rage for fear I effuse unreturn'd love, / But now I think there is no unreturn'd love, the pay is certain one way or another. / (I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd, / Yet out of that I have written these songs.)" Ned Rorem cleverly uses these lines in "Sometimes With One I Love" (1957), the introductory song to his *Five Poems of Walt Whitman* (an essential fact that the copious notes by Mr. Hampson with Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold fail to mention), and his setting clearly underlines the meaning. Even though in its original context this Rorem song serves as a theatrical curtain raiser, it is placed as one of the final selections on the disc. Perhaps the placement is justified by a thematic link to the songs that surround it. The final group of seven seems to be conceived as a gay set, culminating with Bernstein's compelling "To What You Said" from *Songfest* of 1976. According to the liner notes, Bernstein interpreted this text, written from the point of view of an army officer rejecting an advance, as "a repressed poem on a repressed subject."

The performances in general are praiseworthy. Hampson's singing is beautiful, as usual, with pliant, smooth, controlled, and predictable tone. Rutenberg's playing is always capable. Surprisingly, while most of the interpretations are strong, a few show unexpected weaknesses. Technically distinguished performances are occasionally marred by wrong notes, and in some songs few words can be understood without the aid of the printed text. The articulation of certain consonants is sometimes too deliberate, with the performance seemingly striving for effect rather than for meaning. The sudden growl on a word such as "rage" might be welcome from a distance in the opera house, but here it seems overwrought. Finally, the decision to include four spoken poems was a lapse of judgment.

The recording's title song "To the Soul" is by Charles Villiers Stanford, a turn-of-the-century composer with a style mixing Wagnerian and Victorian pomp. Here Hampson sings at his best, with perfect legato, musical phrasing, well-executed climaxes, and carefully planned effects. Yet at the key moment in the final phrase, the words "O soul" are sung with such intensity and passion as to suggest melodrama. This moment crystallizes questions about the state of the soul, of the song, of singing, and ultimately about the compatibility of Whitman's poetry to music.

Richard Lalli
Yale University

Recordings

Pascal von Wroblewsky singt Kurt Weill

Pascal von Wroblewsky, vocalist
Deutsches Filmorchester Babelsberg
Bernd Wefelmeyer, conductor
Orchester der Komischen Oper Berlin
Mario Vencago, conductor
with Männerdoppelquartett der
Komischen Oper Berlin

Deutsche Schallplatten DS 1048-2

Recording includes *Die sieben Todsünden*; *Berlin im Licht*; "Ballade vom angenehmen Leben," "Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens," "Kanonensong," "Salomon-Song," "Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?"; "Ballade von der Höllen-Lili," "Lied von der harten Nuss"; "Marterl."

Some musical myths die hard, and one of the hardest is the myth that the worse you sing Kurt Weill, the better. The origins of the Weill myth lie in the performances and recordings by Lotte Lenya in the 1950s and 1960s, which were accepted as "authentic." Lenya did indeed give the original performances of many classic Weill songs from *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, as well as *Die sieben Todsünden*, but she did so in her youth, when her voice was (in Ernst Bloch's memorable phrase) "sweet, high, light, dangerous, cool, with the radiance of the crescent moon." By the time Lenya recorded her most famous interpretations of Weill, she was in her fifties, and her voice was (in someone else's memorable phrase) "an octave below laryngitis."

Lenya's CBS recordings of the three works listed above, and of Weill's other German theater songs, are stylish, moving, and, in their way, "definitive." But they're not always what Weill wrote. To accommodate Lenya, the conductor Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg transposed *Die sieben Todsünden* down a fourth and similar changes were made to other works as well. For many years, Lenya's style was considered *echt* Weill. This was not so bad when she herself sang the music with such artistry, but in the hands of droning, gravel-voiced imitators the results—especially in a musically ambitious work like *Mahagonny*—can indeed be truly vile.

Since Lenya's death, the original version of *Die sieben Todsünden* has become the

accepted one, and it has been performed by some estimable singers. In the past few years alone Brigitte Fassbaender, Angelina Réaux, Anne-Sofie von Otter, and Teresa Stratas have recorded it. They have proven that the music requires not only acting ability but a "legitimate" voice to do it justice. In short, we now can hear this Weill masterpiece as he wrote it, so it is something of a surprise to encounter a new recording of the old, transposed version.

"Rather than jazz, spirituals, or gospel songs, Pascal von Wroblewsky sings Kurt Weill," announce the notes for this release. Apparently she sings all four, being well-known in Germany as an actress, too. (She has played Polly in *Die Dreigroschenoper*.) Hearing her drone through the first number on this disc, the catchy foxtrot *Berlin im Licht*, the bad old days of diseases droning and crooning these wonderful tunes came back in their dubious glory. Hearing the



eight songs that follow made me wish she had stuck to jazz, spirituals, or gospel songs (although her lack of musical imagination would not seem to recommend her for those either).

The nine numbers (apart from *Die sieben Todsünden*) on this disc are among Weill's most popular songs and need a fresh approach to justify yet another recording. Wroblewsky's drab delivery (often two octaves below laryngitis) does not provide it. Nor do Bernd Wefelmeyer's ricky-tick orchestrations, with their xylophones, woodblocks, and—in a teeth-grittingly sentimental setting of the "Marterl" from *Berliner Requiem*—solo saxophone.

Wroblewsky recorded *Die sieben Todsünden* live in a 1995 concert at Berlin's Komische Oper led by the Swiss conductor Mario Vencago (on a double bill with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony!). That performance was well-received (some of the

applause is included here), but as an addition to a crowded field of recordings it is a non-starter. Wroblewsky uses the Brückner-Rüggeberg arrangement for low voice, and barely gets through it. She presents the text clearly if not very subtly, but her phrasing is choppy and unmusical. She brays as much as she sings and her voice is completely unequal to the tremendous climax of the march in "Envy," proving definitively that "cabaret" ability is not enough for this work.

Vencago's interpretation is stiff and characterless, with slow tempos, little rubato, and even less highlighting of the dance rhythms. The waltz in "Pride" is anything but seductive and the manic foxtrot of "Anger" is annoyingly placid. The performance employs a male octet in place of the usual quartet. I do not know why this choice was made, but the octet does sing quite well, bringing the proper glee club feeling to "Gluttony."

The recording quality itself is completely unsatisfactory. Wroblewsky often sounds like she is singing from behind the orchestra, which is poorly balanced and recorded as well: the strings sound scrappy, the brass sound blatty, the percussion is dull and unfocused, and "Anger" turns briefly into a trombone concerto. (The studio recordings of the songs, though tinny, are better.)

In short, this recording is a poor introduction to a wonderful score. Luckily there are a few recordings that are much better. On Deutsche Grammophon, Anne-Sofie von Otter proves that a gorgeous voice does not hurt this music one bit. Her performance of "Envy" is very exciting and makes a true climax to the work. John Eliot Gardiner does marvelously subtle things with the orchestration, which has a livelier sound in Weill's original version. On Teldec, Angelina Réaux's voice doesn't have the sensual beauty of von Otter's, but her reading is direct and appealing while Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic are direct to the point of brusqueness. This recording also features an excellent male quartet, Hudson Shad.

For those who still want the "low voice" version, Lenya's is intermittently available on Sony Classical. Gisela May's old Deutsche Grammophon recording is now on Berlin Classics, with satisfyingly nervy conducting from Herbert Kegel and a male quartet led by the young Peter Schreier. Any of these older recordings reveal musical and verbal wonders in *Die sieben Todsünden* that this new one does not begin to suggest.

David Raymond
 Rochester, NY

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