course, the hero who discovered that the scenario for the piece was not by Brecht, but by James and Kochno. After further research, I returned to West Dean and reread James’s reply to Drew’s letter. It was, of course, written long after the events it discussed, and by now I knew enough to see that much of it was pure fiction. For instance, Weill could not have been involved in the translation because he went to Italy immediately after the opening night in Paris, and subsequent letters to him from Lenya show that she was working on the translation with James because “the other one” was unusable.

I began to wonder whether, despite what was printed in books, anyone had seriously tried to track down James’s translation before. It had not, after all, taken much ingenuity to approach West Dean. Perhaps there might be a copy in the States. Surely the conductor Maurice Abravanel must have had the words put into his score. Could it be unearthed, or might there be relevant material at the Yale University Music Library, which has a large collection of Weill-Lenya papers?

I faxed the Weill-Lenya Research Center in New York with news of what had been found so far. An enthusiastic letter came back saying that Yale indeed had a vocal score that contained an English text, and Weill had inscribed it at the end with “16 April-4 Mai 1933 Paris, 11 Place des États-Unis,” the address of the de Noailles, with whom Weill had stayed when he wrote the piece. This meant that the Yale score matched the West Dean duplicates. I felt sure that it would contain the James translation, and I hoped it would fill in the gaps. I faxed again asking whether “baloney” was the translation of “lächerlich,” the word Anna I uses to imply that the notion she is involved with her sister’s boyfriend is “laughable.” I also asked if “Faulheit” is left untranslated. So, who knows? I may still be proven right.

Time went by, but the questions surrounding the translation would not go away. Finally, on Thanksgiving day, a piece of paper slid out of my fax machine. It was a copy of the Weill-Lenya Research Center’s e-mail correspondence with Suzanne Eggleston of the Yale Music Library. She had written, “I pulled the vocal score yesterday. Faulheit is number II (2). The phrase has been translated as ‘Idleness is first of all the vices.’” I also asked if the phrase describing idleness was “mother of all vices” or “first of all the vices.” Either would confirm my hunch.

And the translation? The first question people ask is, “Is it any good?” It was done in a hurry. Stresses occasionally fall in the wrong place, and some note values are changed. Some editing is needed, but the answer is generally “yes.” The translation is a wonderfully apposite mixture of biblical homily and 1930s slang. The various “versions” may be accounted for as follows: James made the initial translation by himself, then possibly he showed it to Weill. But Weill left for Italy, leaving work on the translation fall to Lenya. Although her English was not then fluent, Lenya could explain to James that the language needed to be colloquial, more Bronx and less Mayfair. She then literally sat with James, spurring him on. So, a phrase like “Greediness is venal” became “Love of food is lousy.” “Money” is often “dough,” and Anna’s family warns her not to rob people of their “last red cent.” Only once, in “Lust,” does James eradicate Brecht’s socio-political agenda when, rather than explaining that people can only do what they like if they are financially independent, Anna I simply points out the risks of dangling two men on one hook. But otherwise the translation is lively and viable.

And “baloney”? Ironically the word that started off the hunt appears in neither the Yale nor West Dean scores. The word “lachermich” is left untranslated. So, who knows? I may still be proven right.
Books

Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory: Marxism, Modernity and the Threepenny Lawsuit

by Steve Giles


Three things resulted from Brecht’s first involvement with a major film project: a court case on the question of his and Weill’s rights in the stage-to-screen version of The Threepenny Opera; a lengthy, dense, at times brilliantly, at times speciously argued treatise on the conclusions to be drawn from the case and the court’s judgment; and the film itself. Steve Giles’s study addresses the first two of these at some length.

In the first two of seven chapters Giles focuses on the case itself (referred to as “the Beule Suit”—which may or may not have seemed at the time a drolly custom-tailored pun) and on copyright theory pertaining to moral rights and economics. He devotes the greater part of the study to a consideration of Brecht’s responses to logical empiricism and social behaviorism, to Karl Korsch’s brand of Marxism, and to a development of accounts of ideology, social-scientific method, and the theory-praxis relationship as part of a response to, and critique of, Walter Benjamin’s and Korsch’s ideas. To conclude, he considers the contemporary relevance of Der Dreigroschenprozess.

In one sense, the case for the “contemporary” relevance of Der Dreigroschenprozess was made earlier in the book, and I suspect that I might not be alone in finding the gallop through and around fields signposted post/structuralism, anti-humanism, the death of the author, paradigm shifts, and post-modern, sociotemporal, cultural, radicalized and sociological modernity(ies) exhausting. Moreover, given that Giles entitles the last chapter “Pipped at the Post,” one is tempted to borrow the equine analogy and suggest that this particular nag is handicapped by being asked to carry too much weight. That the track also features a few too many hurdles is also hinted at by the author’s roping together of stylistic and critical solecisms. On the one hand, he concedes that there is “a Brecht . . . of whom it might be said . . . ‘My name is Brecht: and there’s a helluva lot of us’” (p. 169); on the other, he solemnly asserts that he has “the rather more modest aim of exploring the, or an/other, Brecht synchronically.” Looking to place a bet on any of these particular runners, one is tempted to fall back on Roy Campbell’s quip: “But where’s the bloody horse?” In another sense, the absolutely contemporary relevance of the case and Brecht’s methods of argument might be viewed in a different light, given the recent court case brought by his heirs in Germany and the subsequent decision to prevent distribution of Heiner Müller’s Germania 3: Gespenster am toten Mann because of questions of “intellectual property.”

The most valuable contributions the book makes to Brecht scholarship are the clear, measured, and well-researched details of the lawsuit itself, the chronology of the collaboration between Brecht, Weill, and Nero Film AG, the reasons for the judgment, and the setting of the relevant issues—authorship, moral rights, intellectual property, adaptation of an existing script—within the context of court rulings from the period. Giles leads the reader through a thicket of legal rulings, clarifications of previous judgments, and contemporary commentaries on the case with a sure sense of what is important. Somewhat puzzling, however, is his (presumably deliberate) decision to devote no space to a consideration of Kurt Weill’s position in the events. Surely some discussion of the details of Weill’s case and the decision in his favor would have thrown more light on Brecht’s case and its failure. Moreover, the correspondence between Weill and Universal Edition would have been a valuable source for establishing just how accurate Brecht’s assessment of the behavior of the film people might have been. Even Weill writes (28 September 1930) that “everything is happening in continuous breach of our contracts”(!); and on 9 October 1930 he asserts that he has “to protest against the kitsch being manufactured,” going on to describe the methods as the sort of thing “one only thought possible in Wild West novels.”

In the discussion of Der Dreigroschenprozess itself, Giles takes the opportunity to point to Brecht’s often economical (in several senses) approach to facts and his ability ex post facto to present details and issues in a way that best suits an already predetermined method of argument. This is not to deny the importance of Der Dreigroschenprozess and the sometimes dazzling, often inconsistent, and always provocative arguments, expositions, and commentaries that Brecht offers on questions such as the relationship between knowledge and production, capital and art and culture, ideology and ideas, theory and praxis. But while Giles’s establishment of elective affinities between Brecht and Benjamin (especially in the case of the latter’s crucial essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) is revealing, it sometimes seems as if he thinks Brecht and Benjamin to be writers with a shared approach to fundamental cultural and ideological issues. That this was far from the case is borne out by Brecht’s critical comments on Benjamin’s “aura” theory (Journals, 25 July 1938), a detail assigned to a footnote on page 165 without further substantive discussion. Such differences of attitude between the two were more often than not a reflection of Brecht’s views on the relationship between form (or rather style) and content—views which were conditioned by his own fondness for “plumpes Denken,” for sentences which “intervened” or “engaged” (Gesammelte Werke 20, p. 173), and for a treatment of complex issues with concise and clear language (Briefe, p. 300). Such observations might usefully be heeded by today’s paraders of “lit-crit” positions, most of whose writings are notable for a combination of prolixity and hectoring, pontificating shrillness.

While there may well be analogies between some of Brecht’s views and the positions of some contemporary theorists, it is well to remember that the Brecht (not, in this case, one of many) who wrote to Benjamin that he admired his essay on Eduard Fuchs (“there’s not a touch of decoration, but everything is elegant (in the good old sense)” [Briefe, p. 325]) and who sought, only partly in jest, assurances from Helene Weigel that the sentences in Korsch’s Marx book were “still nice and short” (Briefe, p. 273), would have had little hesitation in branding many of today’s proficient purveyors of intellectual commodities as exemplary (and hence deplorable) Tuis.

Michael Morley
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Tuis: from the initials of the reversed Tellek–Ulān, a term Brecht used to refer pejoratively to “landlords of the intellect” and “intellectuals of the era of the marketplaces and commodities,” who excel in phrase-mongering, jargon deployment, and obscurantism. They are at the center of his Turroman and the play Tarandot.
Books

Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim

by Geoffrey Block


In his engagingly titled new study Geoffrey Block provides a close-up look at fourteen musicals and then, in a structurally divergent final chapter, assesses Sondheim’s career. Happily, among Block’s selected musicals are two by Kurt Weill, Lady in the Dark and One Touch of Venus, and Marc Blitzstein’s labor musical, The Cradle Will Rock. His other choices—including Porgy and Bess, Pal Joey, Carousel, My Fair Lady, and West Side Story—are, by design, entirely unsurprising: Block is not a contentious revisionist, a prickly, ocd/ml firebrand determined to dismantle the canon. He is a classicalist eager to acknowledge the fact that the Broadway musical indeed has a pantheon worthy of serious critical attention.

Following an “Overture” (“Setting the Stage”) Block divides his survey into two “acts,” “Before Rodgers and Hammerstein” and “The Broadway Musical after Oklahoma!” While Carousel is the only Rodgers and Hammerstein show singled out for a chapter of its own, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical play is invoked throughout as the genre’s Platonic ideal. But it is typical of Block’s generosity that he finds merit on both sides of the great divide of Oklahoma!: he writes in his introduction, “the song and dance musical comedies that prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s and the integrated musicals that became more influential in the 1940s and 1950s both allow a meaningful dramatic relationship between songs and their shows.”

Suffused with enthusiasm, decency, and common sense, Block is a nimble and exacting maestro. In a notably self-effacing style—his goal is to showcase the works rather than his own analytical ingenuity—Block accomplishes the essential task of all good criticism: he enables us to see the musicals with a greater depth than we could likely manage on our own, and, by fortifying us with his insights, encourages a return to the shows for another look. Under Block’s baton, familiar, indeed unavoidable, topics acquire urgency and heightened significance: for instance, the kind and degree of integration between a show’s music and its book, between the sung and spoken word, between choreography and natural movement; the conflicting claims of musical authenticity vs. musical accessibility; and the pressures, emotional as well as artistic, of laboring in a commercial and collaborative medium. Block guides us through each show from the first light of initial conception, through pre-production, rehearsals, and tryouts, and up to opening night and beyond, at each step considering why, where, and how musical material was added, trimmed, excised, or rearranged. He assesses how shows were received by their original audiences and considers the musicals’ legacies on records and discs, in revivals and critical standing.

In his introduction Block notes that, until recently, books on musical theater have been written by journalists or theater historians who slighted the musical contributions. Filling the gap, Block brings a musicologist’s expertise to a dissection of how melody, harmony, counterpoint, rhythm, leitmotifs, meter, pitch, and orchestration function on the Broadway stage. Although Block claims that “the language of the analysis is intended to be accessible to readers unversed in musical vocabulary,” the diction in his musicological passages is likely to be troublesome for the lay reader; nonetheless, the author’s pledge to focus on “the musical expression of dramatic meanings and dramatic context” yields fertile insights to theorist and layman alike. Block’s procedure is to focus on a few representative numbers from each show, suggesting ways in which music illuminates mood or character, or provides a narrative climax.

Not surprisingly, Block’s chapter on Weill, “Lady in the Dark and One Touch of Venus: The Broadway Stranger and His American Dreams,” is wonderfully fair-minded, an all-too-rare instance of a critic judging the Broadway work on its own merits rather than in disillusioned comparison to the composer’s European oeuvre. Block is neither shocked by nor disapproving of Weill’s adjustment to the demands of Broadway, nor does he feel the fact that Weill’s chief competitor was Richard Rodgers rather than Paul Hindemith presupposed a falling off in musical accomplishment. To make the case for Weill’s Broadway works, Block does not devalue the composer’s landmark collaborations with Brecht or his modernist concert pieces; rather, like Weill himself, Block appreciates good music wherever he finds it. Significantly, Block chooses for examination Weill’s two biggest successes. While the two shows may have conformed in some respects to prevailing standards, Block correctly cites their decidedly experimental elements, the extended musical scenes in the three mini-operettas in Lady in the Dark, the extended compositions for Agnes de Mille’s ballets in One Touch of Venus.

The author traces the “process by which” fragments of A Kingdom for a Cow, Happy End, and Marie Galante reemerged in Lady in the Dark and One Touch of Venus, suggesting “a deeper than generally acknowledged connection between the aesthetic and working methods of the European and the American Weills.” Block also places Weill’s adherence to “a gestic music based on rhythm” as a major, “demonstrable” link between the composer’s methods in Berlin and on Broadway. Provocatively, he notes that the way songs often interrupt the action in One Touch of Venus provides an echo of the epic theater aesthetic Weill developed with Brecht. “‘That’s Him!’” Block argues, “is representative of Weill’s earlier ideal by distancing the singer from the object and providing a commentary on love rather than an experience of it.” Lamenting Weill’s exclusion from recent surveys of the Broadway musical and the notable absence of fully-staged revivals, Block sees Weill as an important Broadway artist whose work fuses popular with classical tendencies and whose bold, astutely theatrical approaches to the interaction between score and libretto had a sizeable impact on the development of the post-Rodgers and Hammerstein musical.

Although he has personally overcome the traditional academic disdain for the Broadway musical, to which he was exposed as a musicology student in the early 1970s, Block has not entirely forgotten it. There are lingering traces here of a keen graduate student trying to convince his fuddy-dudly elders that the best Broadway musicals really are not a guilty pleasure, a place “merely” of “enchanted evenings,” but a subject worthy of sober academic inquiry. Block’s writing advocates a theatrical tradition, for which, as his own rigorous analysis attests, there is absolutely no need to apologize.

Foster Hirsch
New York City
Performances

The Threepenny Opera

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Wilma Theater

In repertory

When John Gay and Johann Christoph Pepusch wrote The Beggar’s Opera in 1728 to parody the wildly popular operas of Handel and to poke fun at societal flaws, the plot and characters offered a somewhat unsavory view of life. Weill-Brecht’s Die Dreigroschenoper was an even nastier parody in 1928, when Germany was recovering from defeat after World War I, emerging from the depths of a depression, and experiencing intense protest from the Left and menace from the Right.

Brecht and Weill updated The Beggar’s Opera to 1837 to satirize the era of Queen Victoria’s coronation. Blanka Zizka, Wilma Theater’s director of The Threepenny Opera, updated that updating to 1925, just in time for the inauguration of President Coolidge in the midst of the Roaring Twenties, when the dollar was more almighty than ever and the less fortunate were even less so than usual. Actually, what Ms. Zizka had in mind was more complex: she staged a play-within-a-play, showing the original Weill-Brecht work (set in 1837) being presented in 1925 by a radical theater troupe in an off-Philadelphia venue. This dramaturgical trick allowed for the effective use of 1920’s costumes and powerfully gruesome World War I tattered uniforms, gas masks, and related combat paraphernalia. Larisa Ratnikoff’s costumes ideally complemented Andrei Efrimoff’s brilliant unit set, which featured in-out-up-down-back-and-forth modifications such as only the technical capabilities of the new Wilma could allow. Among the scenic highlights: an ever-visible brick wall, painted with graffiti slogans appropriate to the time (1925) and circumstances (poverty versus riches, crime for all, etc.); a jail cell with a frame that burst into quick-moving marquee lights when Macheath and his jailer began a tap routine; balconies hovering over stage right and left, where Polly and Lucy warbled their operatic duet-parody of jealousy over their mutual “husband,” Macheath; and, off to stage right, the ever-present small stage band deftly led by Music Director Adam Wernick. Unfortunately, 1925 superimposed itself awkwardly on the plot, and text references to the coronation, London, and other things British frequently jarred the theatrical sense—and senses.

Some of the cast was quite good, especially Forrest McClendon as the Street Singer cum clown-as-ringmaster; John Seitz as a quintessentially sleazy Peachum; Robin Miles as a sexy Jenny; Lynn Eldridge as a fully embodied ( vocally as well as visually) Mrs. Peachum; and Anthony Lawton as the distraught, bedevilling Police Chief Tiger Brown. Linda Pierson, as Lucy, demonstrated a good voice in the duet and an acute sense of timing in the “poisoning” scene (thanks to Zizka’s direction).

Unfortunately, the two protagonists, Raphael Nash Thompson (Macheath) and Miriam Shor (Polly), made, respectively, nothing and too much of everything they did or sang. Macheath must dominate the evening by being charismatic, sexy, and seductive. None of these adjectives describes Mr. Thompson’s stage persona. I suspect that Mr. McClendon, the Street Singer, who made a hit with the “Ballad of Mack the Knife,” might have come closer to the ideal Macheath. Ms. Shor, perhaps in a desperate attempt to get some energy out of her partner, overacted and over-sang most of the time, which is a shame, because she has both wit and voice, as demonstrated in her side of the “poisoning scene”—a perfect foil for Ms. Pierson’s.

Excessive emoting, gesticulating, and yelling, in the style that is so typical of situation comedy, marred much of this Threepenny Opera. The evening also suffered from lifelessness, which is not surprising given a weak central figure and too much frivolous activity. A new, 1998 American-style finale, in which Macheath gets a reprieve, a book deal, and a film offer, brought the updating—and the show—to an utterly superfluous end.

M.C. (Forrest McClendon). Photo: Mark Garvin.

Macheath (Raphael Nash Thompson) with Jenny (Robin Miles). Photo: Mark Garvin.
Performances

Der Silbersee

Freiburg, Germany

Freiburger Theater

In repertory
November 1997–June 1998

As with most of his stage works, Weill created Der Silbersee as part of an ongoing effort to liberate opera from its then-current crisis by ridding it of the dust accumulated during the nineteenth century and opening it up to a broad, modern audience. Contemporary opera demanded new approaches, and Weill stood at the forefront of those who pursued this goal by experimenting with different solutions in each new work. In July 1932, while planning Silbersee, Weill wrote to Universal Edition that the work was to be “in no way an opera,” but “rather a work that stands in between genres.” The finished composition hovers somewhere between opera and straight play, but in terms of its musical demands, it lies closer to Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny than to Die Dreigroschenoper. If Dreigroschenoper calls for a cast of singing actors and Mahagonny a cast of singers who can act, there seems to be no clear recipe for Silbersee, save for choosing a cast that can sing and act. Such a cast is even harder to assemble today than in Weill’s time, however, when a lively revue and folk-theater tradition could produce talent like the singer and folk actor Ernst Busch, who played Severin in the Magdeburg production of Silbersee in February 1933.

The Freiburger Theater production cast all the musical roles with singers—even Olim and Frau von Luber, characters who sing just one number but must maintain a strong stage presence throughout. The results on stage were largely convincing, especially when measured against the standard of what an operatic ensemble is generally able to achieve. This held true even in those places where the obviously different talents of pure actors (e.g., Alexander Saas as the Doctor and Georg Blumreiter as the Fat Country Policeman) and acting singers could not be concealed. Two of the performers managed the acting and singing demands with equal fluency: Sabine Hogrefe as Fennimore and Joke Kramer as Frau von Luber (memorable from her wonderfully spiteful performance as Emma Jones in the Freiburg production of Street Scene two years ago). Wolfgang Newerla, who performed the role of Olim, and Rüdiger Wohlers, cast as Severin, are clearly opera singers, yet they both handled their acting roles magnificently—especially Newerla, whose sympathetic demeanor fit the role of Olim very well. Musically, however, Newerla’s excellent tenor voice was not sufficiently challenged by the role.

Stage director Peter Gruber, on loan to the Freiburg Silbersee production from the Wiener Volkstheater, cut straight to the heart of the matter and focused on the role of Fennimore. No longer the innocent, virginial child who begs for entry into Olim’s castle, she is now a plump youth whose coarse, heavy movements cannot be disguised by evening dress. Although she speaks her mind, her heart is in the right place; if she spoke with the relevant dialect, she would be a true “Berliner Göre” [Berlin brat]. Instead of a femme fatale, we now find a meek character whose superhuman quality manifests itself in, of all things, an aura of submissive naïveté. This “dethroned” Fennimore fits astonishingly well into Kaiser’s text—his messages suddenly seem simple, natural, and normal. “He who has to go forward just does it,” Fennimore seems to say, as if this was the most natural thing in the world: human need rather than mission, logical consequence rather than miracles.

Gruber’s second trick is to insert a drastic “grand pause” in the music when Olim and Severin walk to the Silver Lake. The sudden silence creates a startling effect—so startling, in fact, that some in the audience, thinking that the work was over, began to applaud. The silence is intended to transform the storyline from one of realistic action to one of parable. Instead of serving as a “real miracle,” the freezing of the lake can thus be understood as a symbol—one that the chorus members, who by now have taken off their masks, explain to the audience as flesh-and-blood human beings.

The Freiburger Theater has found in Patrik Ringborg a conductor who is capable of bringing deep understanding and feeling to Weill’s music. Although Ringborg accelerated many of the tempi daringly, he was able to achieve a fine musical sensitivity. Similarly, he handled the play of contrasts, which he always knew how to control, in correct proportions. Overall, the Freiburg production of Silbersee may be regarded as a successful, even exemplary, staging.

Elisabeth Schwind
Freiburg, Germany
Recordings

Johnny Johnson

The Otaré Pit Band
Joel Cohen, conductor

Erato 0630-17870-2

It is difficult to imagine Kurt Weill’s American experience without *Johnny Johnson*, his first work for the theater written entirely in the United States. At the urging of his new friend, producer Cheryl Crawford, Weill found in Paul Green’s book an ideal forum in which to contend with his two selves in the new way that his migration demanded. For the last fifteen years of his life, the period of his American exile, Weill would not only have to continue to reject his German art music heritage in favor of populist aspirations, he would also need to reconcile this dichotomy with a new, “American” voice in order to speak the language his Broadway and Hollywood audiences understood. (The failure of the initial American production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1933 may be significant in this regard.) That he was able to find “paradise” (to use Arnold Schoenberg’s word for southern California) in exile so quickly, and make it so bountiful, speaks to Weill’s remarkable aesthetic decisiveness. *Johnny* thus stands at this last fork in the composer’s ongoing “Road of Promise.” While this pivotal position in Weill’s career has been appreciated in one manner or another since the work’s premiere, *Johnny* is one of those pieces (found in most composer’s catalogs) that, while important, is somehow more often mentioned than truly known. A new recording of the work, only its second (and the first in more than forty years), offers an authoritative version that affords scholars, students, and performers alike the chance to reconcile ongoing historical inquiry with new performance evidence.

Mounted by the famous Group Theatre and directed by one of the Group’s founders, Lee Strasberg, the first production of *Johnny Johnson* opened on Broadway at the Forty-Fourth Street Theater on 19 November 1936. Despite a remarkable cast and conscientious and laborious efforts at cutting and reworking, it tallied only sixty-eight performances.

Alongside its notable fellow shows of the 1936–37 Broadway season, *Johnny* surely had the clearest sense of the future, both in terms of Weill’s career and in the development of American musical theater. Sigmund Romberg and Otto Harbach’s *Forbidden Melody* was certainly not challenging when it opened in November 1936. *The Show Is On*, which featured the music of virtually every important Broadway composer and lyricist (Arlen and Harburg, Carmichael, Duke, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, and Schwartz and Dietz, among others), was a Christmas-time revue and surely garnered its two hundred-plus performances because it gave the public exactly what it wanted. Cole Porter’s *Red, Hot and Blue!* and Rodgers and Hart’s *Babes in Arms*, the latter the most successful musical of the year, similarly catered to the public’s expectations.

But *Johnny* spoke to the critics if not to a vast American audience. In his review of the first production, Marc Blitzstein discovered the work’s “velvet propaganda” not predominantly via Green’s satirical story but in Weill’s “confounding sureness which outlasts transient dicta concerning bad taste and lack of it.” Many of the work’s potent points were either too progressive or simply premature for Weill’s early American audience to resolve upon first exposure, and if *Johnny’s* European-ness still engendered a sense of “experiment” about it, Blitzstein did recognize that Weill was fitting right into his new home by offering up “a new form to the musical theater.” (Blitzstein’s own *The Cradle Will Rock* of the following season would already show the effects of this new form.) Although Weill had not yet mastered the language, Lorenz Hart recognized that mastery as only a matter of time. At the first performance of *Johnny* (as reported in Stanley Green’s Weill entry in *The World of Musical Comedy*), he leaned over the composer’s shoulder and said: “What are you trying to do, put people like me out of business?” He did not mean simply that Weill was outsmarting Rodgers and Hart. Here was something new.

Weill quickly reconciled a traditional European sensibility with his desire to reach a wide audience in his new environment. Two years later, *Knickerbocker Holiday* gained 100 performances more than *Johnny*. Aided by the catchy American vernacular of Ira Gershwin, *Lady in the Dark* (1941) gained 300 more. And with Ogden Nash’s lyrics, *One Touch of Venus* (1943) gained 100 more still, Weill’s biggest commercial success ever, aside from *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

*Johnny* led the way toward the liberation of Weill’s talents. It was produced at a time when “folk legend” was the latest thing. The word “legend” in book-writer Paul Green’s subtitle brings to mind DuBose Heyward’s “folk drama” *Porgy*, which served as the basis for Gershwin’s “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess*. But the specific kind of musical satire prevalent in *Johnny* is surely closer to the three political operettas on books by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind that the Gershwins produced in the early years of the Great Depression: *Strike Up The Band* (1927); *Of Thee I Sing* (1931); and *Let ’Em Eat Cake* (1933). This was a time when supplanting comedy with higher-browed satire was a chic way to reach beyond Broadway towards the opera house. *Johnny* accomplishes all of this without exactly knowing it. The very lack of self-consciousness may, in part, have been what allowed it to come and go so quickly and fade into oblivion once Weill began writing hits. In the last years of Weill’s career, though, its example reached that higher plane called posterity in the assuredly “operatic” works *Street Scene* (1947) and *Lost in the Stars* (1949).

At the time of the first recording of *Johnny* (1956), performances of the work were dependent upon the problematic (numerous cuts, transpositions, etc.) 1940 piano-vocal score. By contrast, the new
Erato recording utilizes as its basis Lys Symonette’s 1971 “complete” performing edition, which undertook to incorporate all the performable elements of the show contained in the extant manuscripts. Anyone who knows anything about the theater realizes that completeness and authenticity are not necessarily the same thing. A comparison between David Drew’s detailed inventory (Kurt Weill: A Handbook, pp. 276-77) of the first production’s contents and the liner notes accompanying this new recording shows that what is here is not merely an attempt to recreate the original; decisions have been made that sculpt a finer work profile than that suggested by the extant materials. Yet in the absence of the new, critical edition of Johnny being prepared under the auspices of the Weill Foundation, this new recording is surely the best representation of the work to date.

To my ears, the instrumental passages are the real star of this show. The Otaré Pit Band recreates the sound of Weill’s original orchestration with all its cabaret quirkiness. The provocative sound of the accordion, the composer’s characteristically understated yet suave treatment of the saxophone, the use of guitar and banjo, and, most of all, the movie-house quality of the Hammond electric organ (still fairly novel in 1936), all create the vivid sense of nostalgia necessary to appreciate Johnny as the period piece that it is. Given the limitations of the recording medium, the crowd scenes are effectively presented and the spoken material convincingly delivered.

The solo singing is consistent, if unremarkable; the vocalists do the best they can with the likewise consistently lackluster lyrics. The few numbers which stand out as highlights are three of those published by Chappell in 1936 as would-be “hit” songs: “Oh Heart of Love,” “Oh the Rio Grande,” and “Johnny’s Song” (retitled for publication as “To Love You And To Lose You”).

The liner notes are scholarly and interesting. A single photograph from the first production (showing the cannons from Act II’s “Song of the Guns”) is an added bonus. The entirety of Joel Cohen’s adapted text (including dialogues and stage directions) is reproduced in the accompanying booklet, although the headings of the tracks indicated there do not always agree with the list of tracks at the front of the notes. Following along with the book makes listening to this seventy-five minute recording something more dramatic than merely hearing the score.

Perhaps the only element missing is the kind of conviction one tends to sense when a stage production moves into the recording studio. Leonard Bernstein, John McGlinn, and others have demonstrated that recordings purely from the studio need not be any less committed than those following an actual production, but the present recording does lack a general sense of energy.

A last reservation might be raised by revisiting that term “complete.” Incomplete explanation is provided for the choices that are made concerning what is included and what is excluded from this recording. One laments that the producers did not go one step further and include recorded appendices and a detailed explanation of all the cut music, a procedure successfully carried out on EMI’s landmark recording of Show Boat. While Johnny Johnson is surely no Show Boat, the American musical theater is as indebted to Kurt Weill as it is to Jerome Kern. We need this whole piece!

Despite its minor shortcomings, this recording is to be applauded for the polished way it carries out the task it sets for itself. It is a splendid complement to Cohen’s substantial catalog of recordings that feature underrepresented traditions informed by lessons learned from the historical performance movement. As a valuable supplement to the recorded history of the American musical theater at a very important time in its development, and as an invaluable installment in the recorded legacy of Weill’s music, it should stay in print for years to come. To say that it needs to be followed by an authoritative printed edition, and from that hopefully an inventive production, is preaching to the choir.

With Johnny Johnson, Weill solidified his contact with America and took the first steps toward making it his new home. Given Weill’s uneven reputation upon his arrival, the challenges this show issued to Broadway paradigms, and the dire economic conditions of the time, it is not at all surprising that the show fared so poorly with audiences. But the critics, most notably Weill’s fellow artists, saw its value immediately and welcomed him into their community. The work may come off as an Americanization of some aspects of Die Dreigroschenoper, but it is important to note that Green’s book is not Brecht’s epic. Weill’s score, with its maze of self-referencing that so much deserves further study, strives—if prematurely for its audience—for a new sensibility in which popular song and popular idioms offer liberation from the confines of Zeitoper. Yet, to say that he began here a quest that would soon Americanize him neither captures the transitional nature of Johnny nor does it appreciate the arch of his American experience generally. The simplicity of Johnny belies its example of a compositional spirit liberating itself under the harshest of personal circumstances.

John Andrew Johnson
Syracuse University
Recordings

Bertolt Brecht

Werke
Eine Auswahl

BMG 74321501942

I remember hearing a few years ago that the works of Samuel Beckett were going to be available on videotape, in performances directed by Beckett himself and with actors he had chosen as the ideal incarnation of his characters. The tapes, I was told, would be distributed to producers worldwide to be used as models for all future productions. Thus would the whole world learn how to “do Beckett” and do him “right.”

The scheme (if there really was such a scheme) was aborted by Beckett’s final illness and death. That it existed at all, albeit as less than a practical plan, tells us that even the Beckett people were, in that era, influenced by the Brecht people. Brecht spent the last half dozen years of his life creating Modellbücher (Model Books) of his principal plays. These were to be sent out to producers to tell them how to “do it right.”

The age of videotapes had not yet arrived, and audio materials were circulated only on 78s or LPs. Sometimes a whole play would be made available on such discs: for instance, Die Geschehre der Frau Carrar with Helene Weigel in the title role. But if you wanted, say, Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder in model form, it was to Brecht’s model book that you had to go. A feature film of Mutter Courage was also made but was not held by the orthodox to be a model, even though it was used as such by Jerome Robbins as late as 1963 for the Broadway production.

Robbins’s experience is instructive. He told me afterwards that he wished he had not consulted the film but had operated freely, as with a new work about whose background he knew nothing. I myself began to rethink the whole matter of Brechtian performance. Brecht’s Modellbücher approach—producing the plays himself and documenting the results—was originally quite justified. But there was a fundamental flaw in the thinking. A mode of theatrical production cannot be rendered permanent by decree, nor yet by model books. Even videotapes would not have done the job—for Samuel Beckett or any other original playwright. One has only to think of the history of Shakespeare production to see how good dramatic writing adapts itself to the theater’s ever-changing conditions. Macbeth can be acted perfectly well on a prosenium stage with our hero in the costume of an eighteenth-century aristocrat with lace at his wrists. Even the classic tragedies—originally performed before thousands in the glorious open air of Greece—can be highly effective indoors on the Bowery in New York, before an audience of a hundred or so and acted in a manner clearly influenced by modern naturalism à la Stanislavsky.

These reflections were prompted by Bertolt Brecht: Werke, eine Auswahl, twenty CDs issued in a boxed set by BMG. Ten of the twenty are recordings of Berliner Ensemble productions of plays: namely, Frau Carrar, Leben des Galilei, Mutter Courage, Der kaukasische Kreidekreis, Die Tage der Commune, and Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti. I defy anyone, in these days of abundant video cassettes, to sit through all these audio performances. The musical bits are certainly a refreshing interruption, but the seemingly endless prose will surely send even the most ardent Brechtian to sleep in short order. I suppose these texts are presented here mainly for purposes of consultation rather than entertainment, yet I predict that the consulters will be antiquarians and scholars, not dramaturges, directors, and actors. They will know not to follow supposed models but to confront the text afresh with every production, as they attempt to do with Shakespeare or any classic.

Of course, in such matters there is usually an “on the other hand.” No actor today would venture to imitate Henry Irving or Forbes Robertson in Shakespeare. Yet hearing their voices and their now antiquated mode may remind one of values unhappily lost and perhaps in small part recoverable; an ingredient may be detected that could, if recaptured, enrich a new performance. (Charles Laughton enhanced one of his interpretations by studying a recording of the abdication speech of Edward VIII.)

True-believing Brechtians will argue that some of the performances recorded here are definitive, but I would aver that no performance is definitive in a classic role because the possibility always remains open for a new and different performance that is just as good. Was Helene Weigel’s performance as Mother Courage definitive? By no means: Therese Giehse was just as powerful and expressive in the role a year or so after Weigel first did it.

It is important, then, that no purchaser of this set think he or she is acquiring the definitive demonstration of anything.
More than forty years have passed since Brecht died. Can we, after all this time, hope that such a Selected Works project would give us the best performances, ever or anywhere, of what some competent judge deems the very best of Brecht? Well, no, because not all such items have been recorded, and the rights to those that have may be unavailable or too expensive. There is also an ideological barrier. Among the credits cited in the album are thanks for support from Barbara Schall-Brecht, the company over which she has long had something more than just influence (Berliner Ensemble), and her German publisher (Suhrkamp Verlag). That support was a sine qua non because Brecht’s works are still under copyright in Germany, and his heirs guard them hyperactively, forbidding some performances altogether and micro-managing those that they allow. To some degree their choices go by personal caprice and favoritism but, in Germany especially, there is politics in them: Bertolt Brecht’s own politics for the most part, but politics that in 1998 will certainly seem dated even to those who do not consider them pestiferous.

Soviet Communism survives in Germany in the form of Leninism—supposedly uncontaminated-by-Stalinism. On this basis, Brecht’s politics survive the German Democratic Republic, whose leaders stand accused of letting Leninism down, nothing more. A film has been made (and broadcast in Canada) on the life of Hanns Eisler. It is an outright Communist film, beginning and ending with the Brecht-Eisler song Loh des Kommunismus and with a reverent rendition of the GDR’s national anthem—an Eisler composition—in the middle. There is nothing so blatant in the BMG set, but one must not take as accidental that, where so many major works are missing, there are examples of Party hackwork (Frau Carrar) and purely ideological ardor (parts of the Communist Manifesto versified).

Among major works not included are: Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, Der gute Mensch von Sezuan, and all the great products of Brecht’s youth, Baal, Im Dickicht der Städte, Leben Edwards des Zweiten von England, even Mann ist Mann (which the Berliner Ensemble performed as early as thirty years ago). A television film exists of Baal—a major work, with Fassbinder in the title role—but no part of this is here either. The impression given throughout the series is that of Eisler playing a larger role than Kurt Weill. Eisler’s music for Die Tage der Kommune—a minor work, I think—is here in its entirety while Die Dreigroschenoper is represented only by a group of songs.

This collection does not incorporate all or even most of the finer recordings of the past. There is not nearly enough Lotte Lenya here. At least her magnificent solo rendering of Happy End (1960, Columbia/Philips) should be included (even though the prose dialogue of the show is not Brecht’s), as should her Sieben Todsünden (1956, Columbia/Philips). Nor is a more recent generation of performers represented: no Teresa Stratas, no Ute Lemper. If an English-language item could be used, as is Brecht’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, then at least Charles Laughton’s voice should be heard (from Galileo). From abundant French sources the LP of Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg could well have been chosen (another Eisler score, but this one possibly his very best). A Kurt Weill landmark in my experience was Otto Klemperer’s early recording (1931) of Kleine Dreigroschenmusik. We older Brechtians could keep this game going forever, although it is unfair. Anthropologists must work with their own prejudices and predilections, not other people’s.

A booklet of more than eighty pages accompanies this collection, providing a lot of good information besides presenting the editorial point of view. However, it is in German only and offers no Brecht texts. (Instead, an advertisement appears for the works as published by Suhrkamp! In this, BMG is behaving no worse than many other CD companies.) I treasure my old Mahagonny LPs not least because included with them is the complete German text and a very exact translation, both an enormous boon to the listener. (Because Brecht was always issuing different versions of his plays, one may not otherwise have access to the text in the same form.)

As for the sonic quality of these CDs, one has become aware in the past few years that old recordings are not always better on CD. To be sure, the crackle and other irrelevant noise are removed, but so, quite often, is some of the sound of the music. My listening was not done on first-rate equipment, but suffice it to say that I have no complaints.

Let’s not be above nostalgia or even sentimentality. Nothing in this field is more fun to listen to than the earliest recordings of Dreigroschenoper songs, some of which are now on one of these CDs. Though I do not believe productions should be used as models, I am often tempted to believe that the early rendering of the songs should be. “Alabama Song” is, to my ears, rendered far better by Lenya than by Teresa Stratas, and I have often cited the singing of Trude Hesterberg (not represented in the present set, however) as a kind of model to students and singers. I must relent. In the end, performance models must not be stabilized; they must develop and change with the changing times.

Eric Bentley
New York City
Recordings

**String Quartet No. 1, Opus 8**

*Brodsky Quartet*

*Silva Classics SILKD 6014*

Recording also includes: Dave Brubeck, *Chromatic Fantasy* and Igor Stravinsky, *Concertino*.

Weill’s not very extensive chamber music oeuvre belongs to the first phase of his career. The six-year period encompassing it is marked by the search for an independent artistic perspective, but shows the influence of his teachers, above all Ferruccio Busoni. Weill joined Busoni’s master class in 1921 after breaking off his instruction at the conservative Berlin Hochschule für Musik and leaving the city for his first job as a conductor in Lüdenscheid.

The catalog of extant chamber music starts with the still unpublished String Quartet in B Minor (1918), begun under the tutelage of Engelbert Humperdinck at the Hochschule. It ends with *Frauentanz* (1924), which may be considered not only one of the best of Weill’s early works but also one of the most original documents of his teaching at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin. It is an open question whether, as Erik Levi suggests in the program booklet, these three distinctively individual works show any real aesthetic correlation that goes beyond compositional technique. Even upon an initial hearing, Brubeck’s composition sounds far more eclectic than the other two. What is more, it has a tendency toward epic breadth that Weill and especially Stravinsky had already conquered earlier in the century. Stravinsky’s *Concertino* (which the Brodsky Quartet conveys with appropriate precision and lack of pretension) engages in a much wittier and more radical discourse with Bach’s counterpoint than does the Brubeck, in spite of the latter’s skillfulness and somewhat long-winded dramaturgy. The jazz giant Brubeck, in his effortless spinning out of four-voice fugues and chaconnes, seems more fixated upon establishing his classical credentials than upon achieving an original musical utterance. Trying to prove a jazz-classical synthesis from this collection of pieces is on shaky ground from the very start.

Stylistically, Weill’s quartet lies between Stravinsky and Brubeck. The liquidation of a common formal scheme of separate movements in favor of strongly individual movement characters within an overall formal concept already signals expressive compression and restraint. However, in the “Choralfantasie” finale (newly composed at the wish of Busoni for the first performance in 1923) the piece still falls back upon the romanticizing pathos of the big compositional gesture. This indecisiveness is endearing, but the piece stands awkwardly in the middle of the road between ironic distance and a conjuration of Baroque monumentality. In this sense it is utterly indebted to Busoni’s concept of the *Junge Klassizität*.

The Brodsky Quartet does not seem comfortable with this difficult early work. Their approach here is less coherent than that demonstrated in their performance of the other two pieces, especially with respect to the mediation of the piece’s conflicting expressive levels. A careful calculation of how to emphasize the contrasts in movement character—from which the very idea of the work (or its ideal) emerges—might well lead to a decision to sharpen those contrasts. But the Brodsky inclines toward a certain neutrality, especially in terms of a noticeable leveling of dynamic contrast. Though the quartet plays on a high musical level and is aided by a technically first-class recording, this performance falls short of a superlative level of intensity and engagement.

Wolfgang Rathert
Hochschule der Künste, Berlin
Recodings

**Der neue Orpheus**  
*Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments*

*Rheinische Philharmonie*  
*Carole Farley, soprano; Michael Guttman, violin; José Serebrier, conductor*

*ASV CD DCA 987*

(Recording also includes two selections from *Der Silbersee: Fennimore's Lied* and “Ballade von Cäsars Tod”; and two selections from *Street Scene: A Boy Like You* and “Somehow I Never Could Believe.”)

**Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments**

*Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin*  
*Chantal Juillet, violin; John Mauceri, conductor*

*Decca 452 481–2*

(Recording also includes Ernst Krenek’s *Violin Concerto* No. 1, op. 29 and Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s *Violin Concerto* in D major, op. 35.)

“Now it has seized me again. I’m buried in this new opera, and I leave the house only to take care of the most necessary everyday matters. I must master a type of expression that is still new to me. To my satisfaction, I can now say that—as I’ve already discovered in *Der neue Orpheus*—I’m gradually forging ahead toward ‘my real self’; my music is becoming much more confident, much freer, lighter—and simpler.”

In this frequently quoted passage from an undated letter to his parents (written in 1925), Kurt Weill identified two pivotal works of his early years. The opera *Royal Palace* was significant as the first successful instance of the synthesis of popular and serious elements that would define Weill’s mature style.

In its immediate predecessor, *Der neue Orpheus*, however, the “simpler” elements are not so much assimilated as they are merely asserted. Two outer sections redolent of Weill’s musical practices of the mid-1920s frame a series of seven variations in the rhythms of popular dances. Even though these stylistic insertions are both motivated and justified by Iwan Goll’s surreal text, the effect is not wholly convincing. Beyond the use of the dance rhythms, Weill also drew on elements of the cantata, solo concerto, and opera in this transitional work, and the conflation of these disparate genres only compounds the problems posed by Weill’s diverse musical language. It is therefore not surprising that Kim Kowalke, in his book *Kurt Weill in Europe*, judged *Der neue Orpheus* to be “a tentative and somewhat unsuccessful juxtaposition of old and new.”

Whatever its perceived shortcomings, *Der neue Orpheus* demands the attention of anyone interested in the origins of Weill’s later methods. Iwan Goll’s poem reworks the classic legend into a search by an early twentieth-century Orpheus for his prostitute Eurydice. This may be a bit too self-consciously “modern” for late twentieth-century sensibilities, but Weill’s music is never so heavy-handed or world-weary as Goll’s text. If anything, Weill’s music, on a moment-to-moment basis, exhibits an assurance of technique that can be quite engaging on first acquaintance and also wears well with repeated hearings.

It is therefore surprising to learn that a new ASV release is the first-ever commercial recording of Weill’s cantata, and that is reason enough to welcome it. The performance is credible, but not definitive. Carole Farley’s voice is perhaps too operatic at times, and her diction, although generally good, is sometimes lost in her vibrato. Michael Guttman provides strong support with his playing of the demanding passages for solo violin that lead into and help to define the various moods of the seven variations. The playing of the Rheinische Philharmonie under José Serebrier is likewise good without being compelling; only the most critical listeners will find anything about which they can possibly complain. In short, those who must have *Der neue Orpheus* will not be disappointed by the performance, while anyone who passes on this disc need not worry that he or she has missed a hidden gem.

The other major work on this CD, Weill’s *Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments*, op. 12, predates *Der neue Orpheus* by less than two years, and the similarity of both works is strikingly evident in this release. Even though the Concerto follows the cantata on the CD, there is no sense of regression. Indeed, an inattentive listener might assume that the Concerto’s opening is merely another section of the cantata, so similar is the idiom of both works. The Concerto, however, remains firmly rooted in the more strident language of art music in the 1920s, and Weill’s solid command of that expressive vocabulary has earned this work a small but growing place in the repertoire since its premiere in 1925.

This ASV recording, which features the same cast of performers (minus Farley) as *Der neue Orpheus*, is the fourteenth commercial release of Weill’s Concerto and one of eight currently available in the latest *Schwan’s Opus* catalog. Among its competitors is another new release on the Decca label, which features soloist Chantal Juillet playing violin concertos by Weill, Korngold, and Krenek, accompanied by the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin under John Mauceri. This second CD is part of the series “Entartete Musik: Music Suppressed by the Third Reich.”

Anyone choosing between just these two recordings of Weill’s Concerto will be drawn immediately to the performance by Guttman and Serebrier, for they are easily the more self-assured. Curiously, even though the total time of the Juillet–Mauceri performance is shorter by two minutes, their playing lacks intensity and gives the impression of an overly cautious reading, even at their faster temps. Juillet’s tone, moreover, is not very big, and she often fails to convey the lyricism of Weill’s solo lines, especially in the first movement. Guttman, in contrast, has a more robust sound, and he plays with a confidence that imbues this concerto with the intensity and jauntiness that it needs. Despite the weaknesses of Juillet’s performance, the Decca release will probably still attract buyers simply because it includes the first ever commercial recording of Krenek’s Concerto.

The ASV release also includes four vocal excerpts: two from *Der Silbersee*, Weill’s last work completed in Germany, and two from his American opera *Street Scene*. As with the cantata, Farley’s voice is too big for my taste in the German excerpts but is better suited to the English. The real reason for buying the ASV disc, however, remains *Der neue Orpheus* and also Guttman’s solid performance of the Concerto for Violin. The Decca CD is strictly for those who want the Krenek Concerto or who are obsessive collectors of Weill’s music.

Scott Warfield  
Nebraska Wesleyan University
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