Kurt Weill

Newsletter

Volume 16
Number 2
Fall 1998

LENYA

Centenary

In this issue

Kurt Weill
Newsletter

Volume 16
Number 2
Fall 1998

ISSN 0899-6407

7 East 20th Street
New York, NY 10003-1106
tel. (212) 505-5240
fax (212) 353-9663

The Newsletter is published to provide an open forum wherein interested readers may express a variety of opinions. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. The editor encourages the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for inclusion in future issues.

Internet Resources

World Wide Web: http://www.kwf.org

E-mail:

Information: kwfinfo@kwf.org

Weill-Lenya Research Center: wlrc@kwf.org

Kurt Weill Edition: kwe@kwf.org

Cover photo: Lenya in her dressing room at the Theater de Lys, New York City, ca. 1955. Photo: Gena Jackson.

L E N Y A

In Praise of a Career

She was good. She was very, very good. Her diction was particularly good. I wish to note this here unequivocally.
—Alfred Kerr, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 1928.

Hence the voice of Lotte Lenya, sweet, high, light, dangerous, cool, with the radiance of the crescent moon.—*Ernst Bloch, 1935.*

Lenya can infuse the word "baloney" with a wealth of knowingness that makes Mae West seem positively ingenue.—*Constant Lambert, 1933.*

Lotte Lenya stepped to the front of the stage to sing her air about Pirate Jenny. At that moment the miniature confines of the theater stretched and were replaced by a broad and sweeping arena of genuine sentiment. For that's what art can do, and that's what an artist does.
—Jay Harrison, *New York Herald Tribune*, 1954.

Lenya 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.
—Marc Blitzstein, *Modern Music*, 1935.

Lotte Lenya is a star and a loner. Nothing can be done about it. She is tremendous. [Her performance is] as exciting as anything I've ever heard, and bold enough to suit anyone.—Edith Oliver, *The New Yorker*, 1962.

Have you ever been where thousands of people begged replenishment from one person and poured down love on that person in return? I have, once or twice. Once a few years ago, when the person was Judy Garland. Once Friday night with Lotte Lenya. She is a woman who happens to have been born with the map of a life in her face and voice, and four decades have been stirred by it. She stands there, head back, hands on hips, the joyous scar of a mouth slightly grinning in recognition of a disordered world. She pushes back her sleeves. She sings German, English, and mankind, with a healthy leavening of womankind. We shall not see her like again.—Jerry Tallmer, *New York Post*, 1965.

Up on the stage, glowing like a Halloween pumpkin under the hot lights of honky-tonk Berlin, was Berlin itself: face like a clock without a second hand, a red slash of lipstick across her mouth, body draped in a tacky maroon wrapper with big yellow flowers, a gold medallion on a black velvet ribbon around her neck, one hand on her hip and the other waving gently toward imaginary stars, singing in that voice like a musical cement mixer.
—Rex Reed, *New York Times Magazine*, 1966.

I Remember Lenya . . .

During my marriage to Margaret Anderson, she and I were lucky enough to be visiting Kurt and Lenya on South Mountain Road when the conductor Maurice Abravanel had come to visit after a long interval and Kurt and Lenya were moved to reenact from memory what they recalled of *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Margaret and I sat on the floor entranced and became audience to a work we had no knowledge of, which was retailed to us in narrative interpolations. It was an unforgettable occasion. Lenya's performance, Abravanel at the piano, with Kurt's interventions of occasional scraps of low-pitched song carrying the narrative. I have no recall of when in the early 40s this happened; only of our awareness that we had been uniquely lucky.

—Quentin Anderson, New City neighbor and son of Weill's collaborator, Maxwell Anderson

I have so many memories of Lenya. I still live in the same building as she did, and I often think of wonderful evenings in her apartment on the sixteenth floor and in the country. One winter night in the city, as she stroked her beloved cat, Kenji, she told me about the day she became an American citizen.

It was in May, 1944, if I remember correctly, a few months after Kurt Weill got his papers. Lenya told me she'd studied everything "they" told her. "I said the Pledge of Allegiance to myself every day for a week," she said, "and the day I went, I was so nervous I thought I would be sick. The room was filled with people, all kinds, and the judge called almost everyone in the room before he got to me, and he asked them a million questions. I thought, 'Oh my God, I won't make it. They will send me back and everything will be over.' Finally, the judge called my name and I walked up saying the Pledge of Allegiance to myself. 'Mrs. Weill, who was the first President of the United States?' I looked at the Judge and I thought, Thank God, I know the answer!. . . 'Abraham Lincoln,' I said, as loud as I could. 'That's good enough,' he said, and I was in!"

I stared at her, speechless, and then she leaned over, took my hands and whispered, almost conspiratorially, "I would have been a real flop if he asked me one more question." We laughed until we were weak.

—Dolores Sutton, actress and friend

Some time after Kurt Weill died, Lenya married a gentleman by the name of George Davis. One night he was severely beaten and was taken to New York Hospital. Lenya rushed to the hospital to maintain a vigil while he was being operated on.

As it turns out, Ira Gershwin was in New York at the time and heard about it. Although it was late at night, he called Max Dreyfus at his country home. He thought that there might be accrued royalties from the stage musical *Lady in the Dark*, and Lenya could probably use the money for the doctor bills. Dreyfus came to the city along with Ben Goldberg, the firm's controller. There turned out to be about $17,000 in the account and a check was hastily drawn.

Gershwin rushed to the hospital to find Lenya in the waiting room. He explained what he had done, and handed her the check. She looked at it for a moment and said to Ira, "Do I have to take it this year?"

—John Cacavas, composer

Lenya's often blunt frankness never ceased to astound and delight me. I'll never forget the dinner we took together with a friend who thought he was the world authority on theater. Halfway through the meal he unwisely pontificated to Lenya that he did not "think much" of Brecht & Weill's stage work — that it was "too intellectual." Lenya slowly puffed and dragged on her cigarette, then snapped, "The problem with you, Mr. M——, is that you don't like to *think* in the theater!"

Despite the many critics who have named Lenya as one of the great dramatic singers of the twentieth century, Lenya's insecurities plagued her to the very moment she stepped on stage. I remember sitting with her and Anna Krebs in her living room the morning after her legendary Carnegie Hall concert in 1965 and reading the rave reviews from numerous papers. Lenya confessed: "The night before the concert I dreamed I was on stage singing, but the auditorium was empty except for a few old ladies sitting in the front row, passing a picnic basket between themselves and talking the whole time." But perhaps that was Lenya's secret for success: never grow full of yourself and allow a false sense of security to get the best of you.

—Ted Mitchell, friend

Top: Lenya in *Die sieben Todsünden,* Paris, 1933.
Bottom: After the Carnegie Hall concert, 1965. Photo: Ted Mitchell

I knew Lenya for more than a quarter century. We were collaborators and friends. Countless memories and images well up.

There was Lenya the grieving widow determined to protect Kurt Weill's music and reputation from all enemies (real and imagined); Lenya the entrepreneur with a head for business that J.P. Morgan would have envied, professing that she was an artist and did not understand money matters; Lenya, fiercely loyal to me at times when it might have been more convenient for her to forget her commitments to me and take an easier route; the funny Lenya, telling bawdy jokes in her idiosyncratic English and bringing the house down; Lenya the riverboat gambler, suavely dealing poker hands with a lit Pall Mall dangling from her lips; the elegant Lenya who, when she felt like it, could still dazzle in a Hattie Carnegie creation older than some of her fledgling fellow actors; Lenya, tough, guarded, warm, vulnerable—these Lenyas, and many more than there is space for here.

But for me, the image of her that is as vivid now as when I first saw it more than forty years ago is of Lenya the consummate artist—middle-aged, terrified, nearly unknown in the United States except to those European refugees who saw her in her first incarnation as one of the predominant figures in the Berlin theater—pacing the ratty stage alley of the Theater de Lys in Greenwich Village on the opening night of *Threepenny* and on every other night when she performed; hunched over, arms tightly clasping her breast, mumbling what seemed to be a furious prayer, looking for all the world like someone about to face the gallows, instead of one preparing to go on stage in a few minutes to give one of the truly extraordinary performances in the musical theater in this century.

—Carmen Capalbo, producer and director, *Threepenny Opera*, Theatre de Lys

I first met Lenya in Marc Blitzstein's Greenwich Village apartment in 1952 and remember particularly that she was very quiet, listening intently, but hardly speaking during the long conversation among Marc Blitzstein, her husband George Davis, my partner Carmen Capalbo, and myself. It turned out to be our "audition." The next day Blitzstein telephoned to say that Lenya was certain that Capalbo and I were the right ones to mount his new translation of *The Threepenny Opera*.

In our next meeting with Lenya, she was adamant that she was too old to play Jenny. We told her there is no *Threepenny Opera* without her as Jenny. Reluctantly she agreed to perform the role with *her* proviso that if she or we felt she didn't do it justice, she would be replaced during rehearsal. Lenya was concerned because the cast would be in their 20s and she was approaching 55. On opening night at the Theater de Lys, Lenya was an electrifying presence. After her emotionally pent-up rendition of "Pirate Jenny," audiences always remained silent for a long time, drained and moved by her artistry, until signaled by her trademark hand gesture.

The quality I came to admire most in Lenya was her loyalty. When she was your friend, she was your friend. But Lenya could be tough and uncompromising, especially when it came to protecting the integrity and posterity of Weill's music. And also, as I learned, during the poker games she played with ruthless savvy.

—Stanley Chase, producer, *Threepenny Opera*, Theater de Lys

Lenya was always charming and ingratiating. But she was not the world's most beautiful woman, and she knew it. When she was making *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, she wrote to me from England and described how Vivien Leigh was so worried about controlling the camera angles so that the bags under her eyes wouldn't show. Lenya concluded the story in her characteristic manner, "Fortunately, Scott, I've never had that problem."

One day we were out shopping. We got in the car and she pulled out a portable sewing kit, worth about 98 cents. I asked her where she got it. She said, "I stole it." I said, "What?!" She said, "I have to keep in practice. When I was young, my mother used to say, 'If you want your breakfast, go out and steal it.'"

—Scott Merrill, actor and friend

In the summer of 1958, after recording for nine hours in a semi-air-conditioned Manhattan studio, Lenya was close to exhaustion. Yet she insisted upon going on, refused a break, and continued to call for retake after retake of two poems by Bertolt Brecht in Gustave Mathieu's and my anthology of German poetry. When at long last she declared herself "nearly satisfied" with her reading, she collapsed limply into a chair, asked for a cigarette, and said, "You see, I wanted to do right by Brecht."

—Guy Stern, friend and colleague

Lenya outside the stage door of the Theater de Lys, preparing to go on stage in *The Threepenny Opera*. Photo: Avery Willard

When Lillian Ross came to interview the cast of *Brecht on Brecht* for the *New Yorker*, Lenya came up to me, warning, "Mendy, don't tell her how long we know each other. They know how old I am. They *don't* know how old you are —yet." It was some time in 1935 when she and Kurt first came to our apartment, because my father Meyer Weisgal produced *The Eternal Road.* I had a front row seat for every Saturday matinee, and I can still see her as Miriam weaving a huge basket and singing in that inimitable voice, "My bruzzer iz high in zuh Councils of Egypt. My bruzzer is mighty in Egypt." But it was in *Brecht on Brecht* that she literally saved my acting life. Struggling with a rather violent anti-war poem, I was probably ranting with emotion and certainly overdoing it— the director terribly unhappy and completely unable to give me any advice— when Lenya left her stool, came over to me and whispered, "Mendy, Brecht wasn't Jewish." Of course. No fancy babble about "*Verfremdungseffekt*" or "alienation"— simply say it. I shall never forget her.

—Michael Wager, actor

In *Brecht on Brecht*, 1962.

Lenya's frugality was notorious to everyone who knew her. As her accountant, I knew that she didn't need to worry about the basic necessities of life. I remember being with her and her friend Victor Carl Guarneri in a New York shop when she stopped to admire a blouse that cost $75. "I'd love to have that blouse," she said with a reluctant hint in her voice, "but it's really too expensive." So Victor, who was always generous toward Lenya, bought it for her as a surprise.

—Milton Coleman, Lenya's accountant

In the world of repertory opera and theater, the job of the prompter is of utmost importance. This person sits in an inconspicuous box in front of the stage apron and supplies lines, makes up for missed cues, and unobtrusively readjusts forgotten lines during the course of a performance. Needless to say, this takes a great deal of skill and a sharp presence of mind. An experienced prompter knows when to prompt, but also, when *not* to prompt!

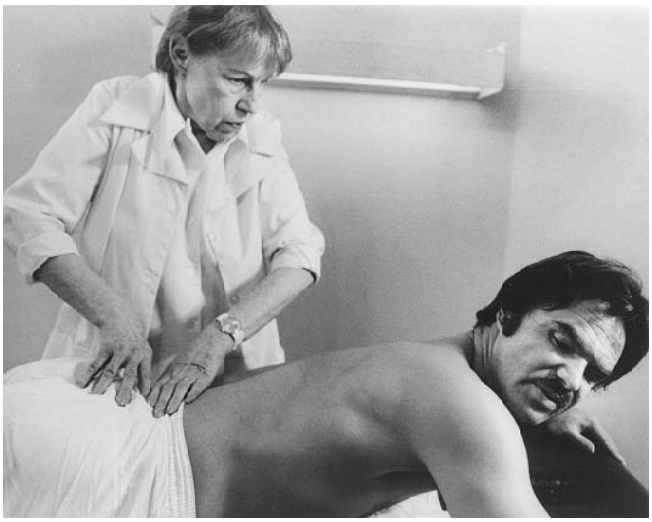
At a festival in Recklinghausen, Germany, Lenya was playing one of the longest and most exhausting parts ever written for an actress: the title role in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. She studied the original German script and Dessau's songs in New City, where I coached her in the songs. (She used to call the first song—"Ihr Hauptleut, laßt die Trommel ruhen"—"The Tschaikovsky Song," because it starts on the same four notes as Tschaikovsky's Piano Concerto.)

It so happened that during the rehearsal period in Recklinghausen the regular prompter suddenly fell ill, and a substitute had to take her place. Lenya always knew her lines to perfection—something an experienced prompter would realize immediately. But not the substitute in Recklinghausen. She religiously "threw" Lenya one line after another. For a while Lenya put up with it. But when the prompter kept doing it—even for the shortest of sentences—Lenya dropped her character, walked straight ahead to the prompter's box, and—in her best Viennese—exclaimed for all to hear: *"Hören's! Ich geb Ihnen 100 Mark, wenn Sie diese Scheisse für sich behalten!"* ["Listen, I'll give you a hundred Marks if you keep this shit to yourself!"]

—Lys Symonette, vocal coach and friend

Lenya brought so much joy and happiness to our lives during the last few years of her life when we really got to know her as a friend. I remember her stopping for dinner on her way home to Brook House one day, coming from New York City. That evening, *Semi-Tough* was on television. In the scene where Lenya is giving Burt Reynolds a massage, she couldn't understand her own lines. She asked us, "Vat did she say?"

—Jan and Niles Davies, neighbors in New City



With Burt Reynolds in a scene from *Semi-Tough*. Photo: United Artists

My partner Gene Lerner and I worked very closely with Lenya before, during, and after our production of "Berlin to Broadway with Kurt Weill." The show opened in late September of 1972. When we learned that Lenya's birthday was on October 18, we told her we would very much like to give her a very special birthday celebration right from the stage of the Theater de Lys, with the entire audience, cast, musicians, tech people, etc., toasting her. At first she demurred, "I don't want to go public with my age," she protested, acknowledging that this would be her sixty-fourth birthday. (So the lady dropped ten years. "So what!" as her famous song goes.)

Eventually she came around and agreed to our plans. And what an evening it was! With the entire audience sipping champagne, the cast and musicians on stage serenaded her with special songs (Weill, of course) concocted for the occasion, and the president of Paramount Records gave her a special "Lifetime Achievement Award." She later confessed that it was her most wonderful birthday ever.

—Hank Kaufman, producer, *Berlin to Broadway*, Theater de Lys

From the day I started working on *Cabaret* I never thought of anyone but Lenya for the role of Fräulein Schneider—and I'm quite sure I can speak for my collaborators as well.

When Lenya finally came in to hear the score for the first time, John Kander and Fred Ebb began by playing and singing "So What" for her. Without a moment's hesitation, she said "I'll do it!" I remember her agent blurting out, "Not so fast, Lenya. Not so fast."

But that was Lenya—direct, decisive, outspoken. I liked and admired her.

And—to me—she was the soul of *Cabaret*—bringing 1930 Berlin on stage with her as no one else ever could have done.

—Joe Masteroff, book writer for *Cabaret*

Once, as I sat chatting with Lenya in her dressing room in Boston during the tryout of *Cabaret*, she suddenly took my hand and stared at me. "Darling," she said, "You remind me of Kurt." I remember how thrilled I was at that sentence. Could it possibly mean she felt I was that gifted, that talented, or was her affection for me so intense that she drew some parallel between how she felt about me as a co-worker and Kurt as a husband?

Wanting to hear the compliment I thought was forthcoming, I said to her, "Really, Lenya? How do I resemble him?" She looked me deep in the eyes and clutched my hand even harder. "Because darling," she said, "you sweat."

—Fred Ebb, lyricist for *Cabaret*

We were out of town with *Cabaret*, before the Broadway opening. When I had started to work on this project, I had listened to a lot of German jazz and vaudeville music from the 1920s, and there were already grumblings from critics that the score sounded too derivative and Kurt Weill-ish. I didn't agree, but I thought I should go to Lenya and warn her that some critics were claiming that I had done nothing more than imitate Kurt Weill.

She took my face in her hands and said, "No, no, don't worry, it's not Kurt. When I go out on the stage and sing the songs, it's not Kurt. It's Berlin." After that, I decided I didn't give a shit about what the critics thought.

—John Kander, composer of *Cabaret*

Place: Rome, Italy, during the production of the movie *The Appointment*. From the window on a high floor in the hotel room we enjoyed the fine panoramic view of the Colosseum. Then Lenya remarked, "You know, looking at those two-thousand-year-old ruins makes one feel quite young."

—Anna Krebs, friend

After one of my sessions with Lenya during which I was drawing her, in a spirit of gratitude I invited her to choose one of the drawings as a gift. She said, "Thanks Richard, but you must not do that." I said, "Why not?" She replied, "They are works of art and I'll be more than happy to buy them from you, but you have to remember this: people do not value what they don't have to pay for. I appreciate your offer, but please remember what I'm telling you."

During the Weill-Lenya exhibition at the Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, there was a recital of little-heard works of Kurt Weill in the small auditorium opposite the exhibition space. Alan Titus sang some of Weill's music, and after he had finished he motioned to Lenya, who was in the audience, to stand and acknowledge the audience and perhaps take a bow. She refused to stand, and said, "This has nothing to do with me. This is for Kurt Weill."

—Richard Ely, illustrator and photographer

It was not long ago I had delighted in Lenya's incandescence on stage and despaired with her in her moments of grief offstage. I'm certain I was one of many friends who shared these personal sentiments.

She passed away after a long illness, lying on a bed in the hallway entrance to a friend's studio. I held her frail, soft, pink, transparent hands gently in mine in this obscure surrounding. Her pink veins ran across the back of her hand and flowed into the dark red vessel to my heart.

When I stood beside her at the end, the totality of our existence suddenly touched me emotionally. Reality had kidnapped a star and showed me how temporary life can be. There in that dim hallway Lenya gave her last encore to me. No matter how grand, productive, and opulent life may be, the unavoidable end comes wherever we happen to be, in a hallway, or in an alley below a marquee.

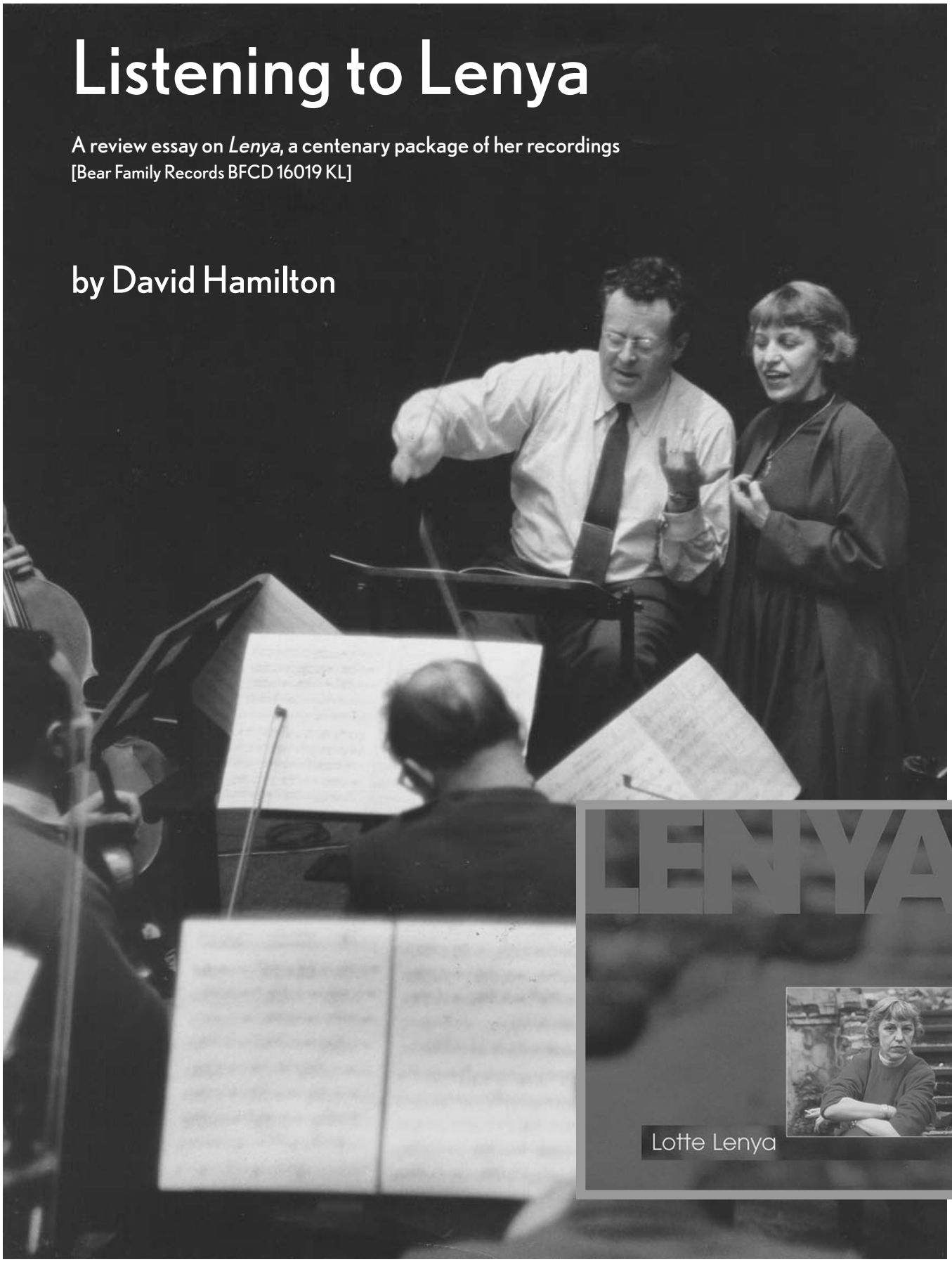
—S. Neil Fujita, friend, photographer, designer

Rehearsing for her concert at Lewisohn Stadium, New York, 1958.

Listening to Lenya

A review essay on *Lenya*, a centenary package of her recordings
[Bear Family Records BFCD 16019 KL]

by David Hamilton



On my shelf of German LPs devoted to "Berlin zwanziger Jahre" nostalgia is one titled "Die Damen, ja, die Damen" (Telefunken NT-907) that presents a dozen tracks by female popular singers circa 1930. Some are almost operatic in manner: the exotically tremulous Rosita Serrano and the more conventional Erna Sack indulge in coloratura-style reprises. Others practice the art of the diseuse, lightly touching the pitches: Greta Keller is atmospheric and expressive, Trude Hesterberg alternates *Sprechstimme* with a baritonal belt. Loni Heuser's "Ach wie schön, man singt immer tiefer" parodies the fashion for mannish-sounding chanteuses, and, sure enough, along comes Marlene Dietrich ("Jonny"), deploying abundant "sexy" portamentos to draw attention away from her uncertain intonation.

At the end of the B side, like a fresh and cool mountain spring, comes Lotte Lenya's Telefunken version of "Denn wie man sich bettet." In this company, Lenya sounds novel and strange. Unlike most of the others, she balances speech and song without apparent disfavor to either. Her diction—those crystalline consonants!—compares well to any of the diseuses; her singing is as musically precise as any of the singers. She is also more direct than any of them, eschewing their trademark mannerisms.

Further listening turned up other singers sharing Lenya's directness; each likewise trained initially as an actor. For example: Grete Mosheim, a member of Reinhardt's company, singing a Holländer song with sweet girlish tone and limpid diction, or the feisty cabaret satirist Claire Waldoff delivering her gamier material straightforwardly and on pitch, with a crackling Berlin accent and in the vocal range Lenya would eventually inhabit after 1950. This encourages the thought that Lenya's singing owed everything to her dramatic experience (and also, no doubt, to the coaching of Weill and Brecht) and little to her more celebrated contemporaries.

Early in his introduction to Bear Family's centenary package of recordings by Lenya, Kim Kowalke notes the fascination of comparing her performances of the same songs across her career. Not being able to resist following that suggestion, I traced the path of her recordings of "Surabaya-Johnny" from her very first 1929 session through a 1965 concert performance.

The 1929 Orchestrola gives us the "raw lovely voice like a boy soprano" described by Marc Blitzstein. Lenya sings in the original key of E-flat, accompanied by a fair approximation of the original scoring. The second stanza is omitted, presumably for reasons of time. The song's verse (to use American terminology) is in two parts, the first in 4/4 time (basically narrative, 16 bars), the second in 3/4 (accusatory, 8 bars); the refrain (love song, 16 bars) returns to common time; the only tempo marking is the initial "Sehr ruhig: Blues." In this recording, the quarter note in the 4/4 sections is around ♩=110, in the 3/4 section around ♩=88 (with a greater contrast in the third stanza). The now standard ritard in the refrain's final line ("und ich lie*be dich* so") is on this occasion very small. Lenya sings the first part of the verse with a light, almost staccato articulation, the second part (as in all later recordings) parlando. The third stanza is similar in character to the first; the likely prospect that Johnny will pack up and depart some morning does not unduly disturb the singer. (Lenya makes a rare false entry beginning the second half of the first refrain.)

In the 1943 Bost recording, the song is performed a step lower, in D-flat. The piano accompaniment is not a reduction of the orchestral score but an arrangement made by Weill especially for this recording (the autograph survives). The composer himself may or may not be the accompanist. The purposeful "Americanization" of the song, especially in rhythmic character, will disconcert those weaned on other recordings. Again, the second stanza is omitted, and the total timing is almost the same as before.

But what a difference! Tempos for the two parts of the verse are distinctly faster than before, but the refrain is slower and the final ritard much greater. Lenya's voice is still essentially that of 1929. She sings the first stanza with warmer tone and more legato, phrasing through some rests in the refrain. But the third stanza is uttered in tones of desperation, and "nimm doch die Pfeife aus dem Maul, du Hund!" has resonances of defeat, perhaps even abuse. From Brechtian objectivity, we have moved into emotional narrative, approaching the torch song (though much more honestly and musically than did Marianne Oswald).

In the 1955 "Berlin Theater Songs," the song is transposed down a fourth to B-flat major and at last includes the second stanza. Though related to the original, Rudi Bohn's scoring strips away most of the countermelodies. Lenya's postwar voice, deeper and sometimes harsher than before, still retains her clarity of articulation, but the interpretation, although beginning somewhere near the gentle naïveté of the earlier recordings, is at once more stylized and more complex. The basic tempo is around ♩=126 with the refrain a bit slower, but the accusatory parlando is different in each stanza. In the first stanza it is slower than the main tempo, spoken matter-of-factly around a low pitch; in the second, nearly as fast, with rising pitch, frantic and desperate; in the third, even slower than the first stanza, reaching a still higher pitch, the voice almost

Lenya recording *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny.* Hamburg, 1956.

Recording sessions in Hamburg, 1956.

breaking on "und ein Schiff liegt unten am Kai." Through both its idiosyncratic but clearly intentional tempos and its general musical discipline, this reading conveys an intensity of purpose and a more monumental quality than either the Orchestrola or Bost versions.

In the 1960 *Happy End* conducted by Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg, we finally hear the original orchestration (albeit transposed down a fourth) and it makes a difference, especially because its elements are so well balanced in this performance. Uniquely, the refrain is here faster than the opening tempo, while the 3/4 section varies from stanza to stanza, though not as strikingly as in 1955. Emotionally, this seems a less intense performance than earlier ones, less specifically characterized.

The last "Surabaya-Johnny" was recorded three-and-a-half decades after the first at Lenya's 1965 Carnegie Hall concert conducted by Milton Rosenstock. It is performed once again complete, in B-flat, and in substantially the original scoring (although less well balanced than in 1960). Hearing it after the earlier ones, one notes a loss of vocal firmness, some verbal slips, and a reading less specific, both musically and theatrically. In its original context, however, it remains exhilarating proof of Lenya's continuing vitality and need to communicate, at the age of 66.

(A footnote to this sequence is a performance of the song's first verse only, from an unidentified TV program at the time of the Theatre de Lys *Threepenny Opera*. The clip features Lenya, Blitzstein, and an interviewer whose ignorance is surpassed only by her grotesque enthusiasm. Blitzstein is at the keyboard and, apparently improvising from memory, gets the harmonies seriously wrong. Sadly, the editors omitted the second and better half of this program, where Blitzstein sings and plays his version of the "Solomon Song" and accompanies Lenya in his version of the "Moritat.")

This survey makes it clear that one should not expect consistency from Lenya. Many factors must have influenced her different interpretations of "Surabaya-Johnny." The song's gradual evolution from the original theatrical context into an independent song was certainly an important one, not to mention Lenya's biographical circumstances. If we want to treat her recordings as gospel, we must accept an evolving gospel. (The notion of faithful adherence to the score was not a relevant concept for her in that she knew Weill's works aurally, not from notation.) Hers was a church with room for many—though not *all*—interpretations; her remark to Weill that "the police should ban" Marianne Oswald's records has our sympathy. She herself inadvertently functioned as a sort of "false prophet," when her baritonal later voice and the transpositions it necessitated in the Columbia-Philips recordings were taken as models by others. Still, some such followers, notably Gisela May, made individual and compelling contributions to the tradition.

A significant merit of the Bear Family set is its reminder that Lenya's career embraced more than Weill and/or Brecht. Weill does loom large here; the famous Columbia-Philips recordings are all included complete—rightly so, since her role in their creation, effectiveness, and quality clearly encompassed the totality, not just the parts in which she sang. Beyond those, recordings of Lenya speaking, in both German

and English, remind us of her dramatic career, while live concerts, interviews, and a recording-session clip show her in spontaneous contexts, original in expression, scathing or rueful in wit. Enough of this is new and fascinating to make the set essential for admirers and students of Lenya's art, despite some editorial deficiencies of selection and packaging.

Typical of Bear Family productions, this one (comprising 11 CDs) comes with generous context and documentation. The lavishly illustrated booklet in LP format (12" square, 250 pages) contains an appreciation by Kim Kowalke; biographical articles by Jürgen Schebera (the European career) and David Farneth (the American years); reminiscences by Guy Stern, Lys Symonette, Gerhard Lichthorn, Alan Rich, George Avakian, Harold Prince, Teresa Stratas; reproductions of original liner notes and record labels; and a detailed discography. Here, the variety and richness of the Lenya career—and its twists and dead ends and rebirths—are carefully traced, and we also learn about the making of the recordings and where they fit into the career.

Like that career itself, Lenya's work in the studios was erratic: protean, bifurcated, gapped. Her published German recordings up to 1933, all from Weill-Brecht works, have been available on earlier CD reissues reviewed in these pages. (The Bear Family discography notes that she apparently recorded two songs from *Der Silbersee* at a Berlin session on February 26, 1933, but these were never published and the masters were probably destroyed for political reasons.) Then comes a decade-long gap, except for a dim and fascinating off-the-air recording of a song from a 1937 Blitzstein radio "song-play." The text of this piece is printed in the booklet, ostensibly because of the sound quality. In truth, Lenya's foreign pronunciation and her not-quite-natural accentuation of the words account for much of the difficulty in decipherment, foreshadowing her problematic future on the American stage.

More successful are the 1943 recordings: the Bost set of six Weill songs and the powerful recordings for the U.S. Office of War Information. The latter include Paul Dessau's setting of Brecht's "Lied einer deutschen Mutter," not previously published. (Later, among the tracks from *Brecht on Brecht*, Lenya sings Eisler's more haunting version of the same poem—a striking contrast to Therese Giehse's more canonical recording, and more moving to these ears.) Another decade ensues before the 1954 Theater de Lys recording of the Blitzstein *Threepenny Opera* adaptation. From this, and from MGM's 1956 *Johnny Johnson*, the 1962 *Brecht on Brecht*, and the 1966 *Cabaret*, Bear Family includes only the tracks involving Lenya.

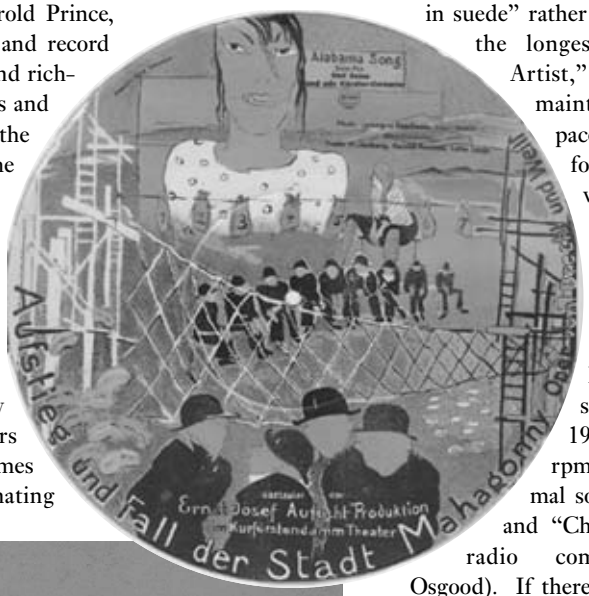
Less familiar will be the two LPs of readings recorded in 1958. "Invitation to German Poetry" comprises forty-one short poems read in the original German from an anthology edited by Gustave Mathieu and Guy Stern. Bear Family generously reprints the original LP booklet, with notes, texts, and English translations. Particularly telling are the readings of the two Brecht poems, to which is appended a private recording (tentatively dated c. 1962) of his "Kinderkreuzzug." Here is another case where Lenya's openness to emotion generates an impact quite different from Giehse's stoic, tonally monotonous non-interpretation.

The second spoken group comprises Kafka stories, read in English with restrained effectiveness. (I noted one amusing pronunciation slip, when a body appears to be "covered in suede" rather than in "sweat"!) In the longest tale, "A Hunger Artist," Lenya admirably maintains the narrative pace over nearly twenty-four minutes, using variety of tone and pitch as well as that miraculously precise diction.

A final commercial recording is, like Lenya's very first sides, a "pop single": a 1969 Metromedia 45 rpm disc of two fairly dismal songs by John Cacavas and "Charles O. Wood" (the radio commentator Charles Osgood). If there's a story behind this curious *envoi* to a distinctly unconventional studio career, we can probably live without knowing it.

The studio work is supplemented by approximately two CDs worth of material from "live" situations (some already noted above). The lengthy sequence from the last of Lenya's Carnegie Hall appearances (1965) once circulated on a Rococo LP. It includes two selections from *Love Life* she didn't record elsewhere ("Love Song" and "Susan's Dream") and vividly captures her poise and professionalism, as well as the chemistry between singer and audience. Also otherwise unrecorded is "Zu Potsdam under den Eichen," included here both in the Carnegie excerpt and in a 1960 Munich concert devoted to Weill's German songs. The latter, a more formal event, finds her in firmer voice and is better rehearsed and recorded.

Easily the most entertaining new material is that stemming from the pop-hit status of "Mack the Knife" in 1955. In the booklet, Columbia producer George Avakian relates his efforts to promote the "Moritat" to various jazz men, and how Lenya became involved. A session with Turk Murphy yielded an English-language version sung by Murphy and introduced by Lenya's inim-



Above: A facsimile of this picture disc, originally distributed at the 1931 Berlin production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, is included as a "bonus" in the Bear Family set. Below: Lenya's recording for Bost Records, 1943.

itable spoken line from the Theatre de Lys production: "Look, there goes Mack the Knife!" (a line she also speaks on the "Moritat" track in the MGM recording, not included here). Lenya then recorded the song with Murphy's group in the original, for the German market, keeping bravely abreast of the driving tempo while singing the rhythms absolutely straight.

Neither Murphy version was released, partly because six nights later, in the same studio, Louis Armstrong recorded the song (from charts arranged by Murphy). At Avakian's suggestion, an Armstrong-Lenya duet was worked up on the spot. The Bear Family set includes a nine-minute clip from the actual session devoted mostly to working over the "Suky Tawdry" stanza, which involves a break and a syncopation that give Lenya difficulty—a rhythmic move apparently not in her vocabulary. Throughout the retakes, the interplay of these two personalities is a delight. In the end, Avakian fixed the syncopation by editing the tape. The result is bracing evidence of how cheerfully oil and water can co-exist. Armstrong jazzes pitches and rhythms all over the place, while Lenya gamely sticks to Weill's tune in strict time with only rare departures.

Also from the Columbia period are two takes of "Song of Ruth" from *The Eternal Road* made for the "American Theater Songs" album. These were never used, perhaps because neither musical style nor subject matter really fit with the Broadway focus of the album's other contents. (A forthcoming CD release in Sony's Masterwork Heritage series promises not only the complete "American Theater Songs" plus "Song of Ruth," but also tracks from *Cabaret* and *Brecht on Brecht*, and Lenya's versions of "Mack the Knife" with Armstrong and Murphy.)

As already suggested, the interview material is partly disappointing. The best is the talking part of a 1975 Dick Cavett Show. Lenya is at least comfortable with the host, who asks fairly sensible questions. But the concluding "Bilbao-Song," in which he joins her, is embarrassing and would better have been omitted. Another, more formal television clip, from 1964, includes performances of "How Can You Tell An American?" and "September Song." Absent their visual elements, these TV sound tracks make us very aware of the under-rehearsed musical detail, a condition that may also explain why Lenya often seems uncomfortable in them, especially when dealing with material she did not sing often. Another angle of the same problem affects the songs from the 1966 German telecast of her performance as Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Less compelling on their own than Weill's theater songs, these—and her singing—really need to be experienced in the context of the whole production.

Although Bear Family went this far in their inclusion of soundtracks from film and video, they managed to neglect the oldest and most important example thereof. What about "Seeräuberjenny" from the soundtrack of Pabst's *Dreigroschenoper* film? Someday, perhaps we can also have a Lenya video anthology—not, please God, every interview, but a video "portrait" that concentrates on what she did best: bringing words and music and character to vivid theatrical life. Until that time, Bear Family has provided us with much to enjoy, both familiar and novel, and in a format that gives pleasure and stimulates thought.

Matters of Presentation

As one who has produced similar record packages, I feel a great sympathy for the Bear Family team, faced with the challenge of coordinating such a wealth of elements—audio, literary, and photographic. As of the late proof stage that I saw, though, a few things were not quite in synch. For example, David Farneth's text promised more of the Blitzstein interview and the 1964 CBS TV program than is actually included on the CDs. The typographic treatment of extended quotations was also ambiguous—not always making it clear where they end and main text resumes.

Likely to be repeatedly irritating is the inadequate listing of contents for the CDs. The track listing at the back of the booklet is significantly deficient with respect to dates and collaborating performers. In order to find that information one must constantly refer back to the discography, which is ordered chronologically (unlike the CDs) and snakes through many heavily illustrated pages. And, perhaps because Bear Family's collections are usually populated by single songs and not long works, *Mahagonny* in particular is described awkwardly. The tracks are identified in the list only by act and scene number, without the text incipits more familiar to most listeners, even specialists. Also, the two CDs the opera requires are allotted to separate jewel cases, a situation that easily could have been avoided. (Indeed, the eleven CDs would have fit into three jewel cases instead of four.) In the abbreviated listings on the back of the jewel cases, the titles of the long works never appear at all; one has to deduce them from the section titles!

What is more, except for the German poetry sequence, no texts or translations are provided. Many collectors will want to retain their original LPs of the Columbia-Philips series, or even the less-well-annotated CD editions of *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*. (The recent and technically excellent Sony reissue of *Die sieben Todsünden* and the "Berlin Theater Songs" was also notably deficient in this respect.)

Deadlines did not permit extensive comparison of the sound to earlier issues, but random sampling of *Mahagonny* suggested that this transfer is a more solid representation of the original Columbia LPs than were the Sony CDs from the early 1980s, among other things reducing some edgy sibilants. However, Lenya's closely-miked sibilants in the Kafka stories are very distracting (no original was at hand for comparison). Thanks to modern noise-reduction techniques, the transfers from 78s are easier to listen to than in some earlier editions.

A cute bonus disc is enclosed: a quasi-facsimile of the picture record issued in conjunction with the Berlin premiere of *Mahagonny*. Though Lenya's name is listed as a member of the cast, she is not heard on the record, which contains "Slow-Fox" arrangements of "Alabama Song" and "Wie man sich bettet..." [*sic*] by "Emil Roósz und sein Künstler-Orchester." Presumably in recognition of the limited accessibility of 78 turntables, it is not an actual pressing from the original master, but a dubbing at 45 rpm.

D. H.