

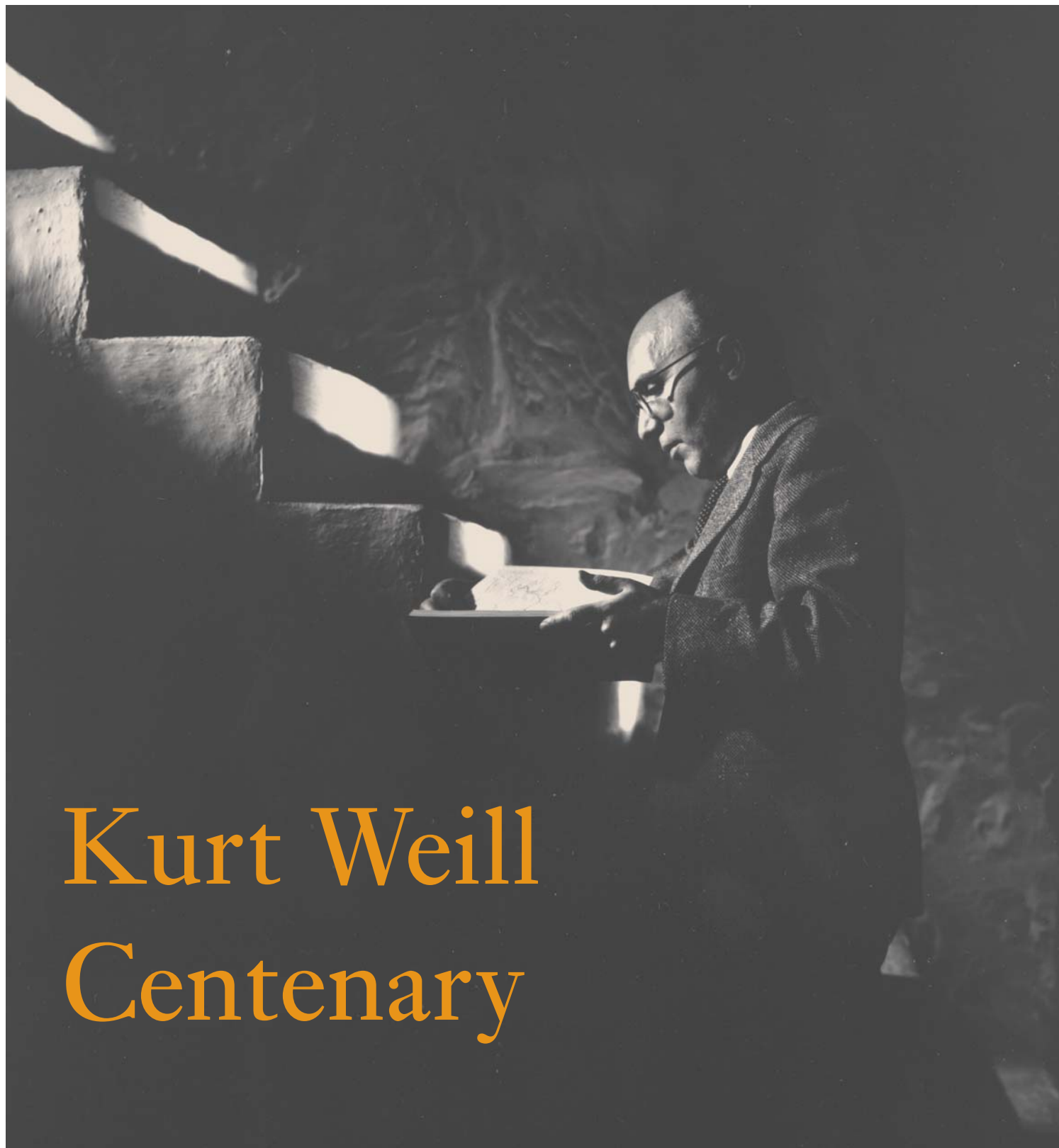
Kurt Weill

Volume 17

Numbers 1-2

N e w s l e t t e r

Fall 1999



Kurt Weill
Centenary

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Kurt Weill Centenary

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Kurt Weill

Newsletter

Volume 17

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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.

Staff

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E-mail:

Information: kwfinfo@kwf.org

Weill-Lenya Research Center: wlrc@kwf.org

Kurt Weill Edition: kwe@kwf.org

Cover: Weill at Brook House, 1946. Photo: Karsh



At the time of *One Touch of Venus*, 1943. Photo: Vandamm.

New Century New Discoveries

*I've suddenly been promoted to the rank of "classical composer," and people are beginning to talk about the "historical significance" of my work. I just found out that the studio of the Metropolitan Opera will perform my old opera *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*.* (Weill to his parents, 6 September 1949)

In completing one discovery we never fail to get an imperfect knowledge of others of which we could have no idea before. (Joseph Priestley)

In private, Weill probably cared a bit more about posterity than his public persona would allow. He obviously took pride in the unearthing of one of his "old operas" in 1949, and the idea of being called "historically significant" while still middle-aged elicited more than a modest smile. But the process of rediscovery of his forgotten works did not begin until several years later, nor did it happen quickly. Even fifty years after his death our view of the whole Weill, in all his variety, is still not complete. Lenya's recordings in the 1950s, the Berlin Festival in 1975, and the Dusseldorf Festival in 1990 answered many questions but posed even more. Now, at the beginning of Weill's centenary season, the process of inquiry and discovery continues. This special issue of the Kurt Weill Newsletter presents articles and press clippings about three important but largely unknown stage works whose modern-day revivals this summer inaugurated the worldwide celebration.

Die Bürgschaft, Weill's last German opera, received its American premiere in May at the Spoleto USA festival in Charleston, South Carolina under conductor Julius Rudel. Kim H. Kowalke investigates some of the reasons for the neglect of a composition that some call Weill's masterwork, and composer David W. Maves shares his thoughts about the music and the Spoleto production.

The Chemnitz Opera production of ***Der Weg der Verheißung***, in Germany, was more than a revival; this production premiered the original German text and Part IV (Prophets), which was cut from the original production before it opened in New York in 1937. Internationally known German critic Horst Koegler writes his personal reactions to the work and analyzes its reception in the German press. For the benefit of readers who will see the traveling production in New York, Hannover, Tel Aviv, or Kraków, we reprint the complete plot synopsis that appeared in the original 1937 souvenir program.

Until the Ohio Light Opera mounted ***The Firebrand of Florence*** in Wooster, Ohio, Weill's American operetta with lyrics by Ira Gershwin had not been seen since its 1945 premiere. Joel Galand, who is editing the work for the Kurt Weill Edition, discusses some of the reasons that the original production of *Firebrand* failed to find an audience, and James Lovensheimer reviews the revived work in its slightly altered form.

Die Bürgschaft

Premiere:
10 March 1932
Städtische Oper, Berlin

Carl Ebert, director
Fritz Stiedry, conductor
Caspar Neher, designer

Revival:
30 May 1999
Spoleto USA
Charleston, South Carolina

Jonathan Eaton, director
Julius Rudel, conductor
Danila Korogodsky, designer



Dale Travis (Orth) and Frederick Burchinal (Mattes) in the Spoleto USA production of *Die Bürgschaft*. Photo: Nan Melville

Wie lange noch?: *Die Bürgschaft* and Its Times

by Kim H. Kowalke

"I have a tremendous longing to hear the music of *Die Bürgschaft*," Lenya wrote to Weill in Paris in October 1933. "It would be like a purifying bath in the River Jordan or the Ganges." Her diction, uncharacteristically religious in its references, might have rung false under other circumstances. But Weill and Lenya's divorce had just been finalized. She was in Berlin, temporarily separated from her "Flying Dutchman" paramour, tenor Otto Pasetti, and living alone in the house in Kleinmachnow which Weill had given her two years earlier for her 34th birthday, just as he was putting the finishing touches to the *Bürgschaft* partitur. He had moved into the house a few days before its premiere in March 1932, but by then he was deeply involved with its librettist's wife, Erika Neher. One day Weill found a warning in his mailbox: "What's a Jew like you doing in a community like Kleinmachnow?" Lenya soon left for Vienna, where she was to play Jenny, onstage and off, to Pasetti's Jimmy in *Mahagonny*. When Lenya and Weill eventually reunited for their Atlantic crossing in 1935, *Die Bürgschaft* was left behind, though not quite forgotten: a decade later, Weill would describe *Street Scene* to his brother as his "most important work since *Die Bürgschaft*." But he died believing that the full score, orchestral material, and crucial "notes for production" had been destroyed during the war or simply lost by Universal Edition.

Lenya's longing for *Die Bürgschaft* was finally fulfilled, but only in part, by the first (and, until 1998, sole) postwar stage production in October 1957—in a "new version" at West Berlin's Städtische Oper (by Caspar Neher and the original director, Carl Ebert) that Lenya deemed a disservice to Weill and the work. (UE had by then managed to locate performance materials, but not for the critical new scene in Act II dating from January 1932, which didn't resurface until 1993). During her eventful stay in Berlin, Lenya received West Berlin's highest cultural honor, the Freedom Bell. But within two weeks of that occasion, her second husband, George Davis, died of a massive heart attack at the age of 51. Consequently, Lenya's later recollections of *Die Bürgschaft* were emotionally charged and highly conflicted on several counts. Nevertheless, she steadfastly seconded Weill's own appraisal of it, characterizing it as his "return to real music-making" after the break with Brecht.

I vividly recall an afternoon in late September 1980 at the Kurt Weill Foundation's first office, a shared studio apartment on West 73rd Street. Whatever tasks Lenya, Lys Symonette, and I had planned for that day were instantly shelved when Lenya opened an envelope containing tape recordings of the recent Berlin radio production of *Die Bürgschaft*. (It was the first performance of any kind since Hermann Scherchen's NDR broadcast in 1958.) Lys and I hastily grabbed a piano-vocal score from the newly installed bookcase. Lenya simply closed her eyes in anticipation and sat back in a rocking chair.

Our collective excitement barely outlived Johann Mattes's first phrase of the Prologue. "Weh uns! Wir sind verloren!" acquired unintended irony as what sounded like ponderous sight-reading was compounded by inexplicable cuts—four bars here, thirty-two there, whole musico-dramatic units mutilated or omitted—that made following the score all but impossible. (Later we learned that the score had been hacked to pieces arbitrarily in order to fit a two-

hour broadcast slot.) The opera was not recognizable as Weill's. Lenya turned ashen, then seethed in outrage, and finally sank back in resignation: "Wie lange noch?". A year later she was dead, her longing to see *Die Bürgschaft* restored to the repertory still unsatisfied. I can confidently say that nothing would have pleased Lenya more than to have witnessed the ten-minute ovation which greeted the American premiere of *Die Bürgschaft* last May with Julius Rudel conducting the revelatory Spoleto USA production and subsequent cast recording.

"A stunning work that knits together Weill's intense social and political concerns with compositional skill and invention of the highest order," raved Heidi Waleson in *The Wall Street Journal*. Other astonished critics cornered me in Charleston and inquired, "how could so powerful an opera have languished in obscurity for fifty years after Weill's death?" Though *Musical America* described it in 1932 as "the first operatic work of distinctly modern hue that has met with approval from all quarters," *Die Bürgschaft* has had to wait far longer for revival than less worthy contemporaneous "entartete" works or later operas premiered under the aegis of the Third Reich, including Neher-related pieces by Orff and Wagner-Régeny. How could Weill's most ambitious work, widely hailed after its three successful productions in 1932 as the "starting point for a new type of modern German opera" by the "only real opera composer in Germany," have been so neglected?

A simple question—but one which would require a monograph about twentieth-century musical aesthetics, cultural politics, and reception history to answer satisfactorily. The short, pat answer: *Die Bürgschaft* had no role for Lenya and no text by Brecht. Because it required operatic voices throughout and showcased no "songs" capable of popular exploitation, it was not a candidate for Lenya's Philips/Columbia recording series, which in turn would fuel the so-called Weill-renaissance of the late fifties that eventually restored *Die sieben Todsünden*, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, and even *Happy End* to the repertory. Leaving behind the pastiche and parodic aspects of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* in favor of what Weill termed "the thoroughly responsible style" incipient in *Der Jasager* and *Der Lindberghflug*, *Die Bürgschaft* lacked the crucial "Brecht-Weill" trademark and thus was irrelevant to the concurrent Brecht revival in both East and West.

In fact, already in 1932, Weill reported to Lenya that a jealous Brecht had been vigorously campaigning against *Die Bürgschaft*, ridiculing his former collaborators' surprising success as "a middlebrow muddle," using clever puns such as *Spiessbürgerschaft* and *Avantgartenlaube* to dismiss its broad appeal. Though Ernst Bloch reviewed the opera appreciatively, astutely finding something of a "Jewish Verdi" in it, many of his leftist colleagues missed the fact that its repeated motto paraphrased an axiom by Marx himself. Instead, they lamented what they discerned as a retreat from the aggressive "Marxist stance" of *Mahagonny* (whose ideological content, if any, had indeed been muddled!). Echoes from the Brecht-Eisler circle still reverberated decades later in T. W. Adorno's obituary evaluation of the piece (which sounds suspiciously second-hand): "Weill tried to write grand opera," "the most pretentious was *Die Bürgschaft*," but "even he recognized its shortcomings."

Its libretto must be chief among them, according to the ubiquitous post-War "poor-Weill-without-Brecht" premise. After all, it was Neher's first such attempt, and wasn't "Brecht's designer" a master of images, not words and dramaturgy? Weill had unwittingly abetted this judgment by his last-minute decision to suppress his own credit as co-librettist, which, as stipulated right from the outset of the project, was to be explicitly acknowledged this time

around. Those unaware of Weill's almost analogous (and uncredited) contribution to the libretto of *Mahagonny* might understandably question Neher's qualifications to fill Brecht's shoes. The libretto does indeed lack the brash breeziness and hip imagery of Brecht, but Weill and Neher had set themselves a very different task: to write a tragic "epic" opera for state-controlled theaters during perilous times in "an attempt to adopt a position on matters that concern us all."

The libretto of *Die Bürgschaft*, at once topical in its references and universal in its concerns, is anything but straightforward or traditional in subject or dramaturgy. The opera borrows its title from a *Ballade* by Schiller; it ascribes its epigraphic Talmudic parable to Herder, thereby invoking cultural icons to whom even the National Socialists could not object. Its structure, a prologue and three acts, recalled that of Wagner's *Ring*, whereas its critique of the alliance between money, power, and law is that of Seneca rather than Marx—for the same reason. With Gandhi and Tolstoy standing incognito in the background, the libretto is never merely what it seems (and much stronger than its reputation).

Weill discouraged UE from circulating the *Textbuch* without his score, which he did not even begin to compose until the libretto had been finished and then thoroughly rewritten. "Too dangerous," he warned again and again. "The piece will be incomprehensible without the music," he maintained, almost as if it were the crucial decoding mechanism that dramatists, conductors, and directors would need to decipher the text. (It is not coincidental that Weill's later comment that "every text I've set looks entirely different once it's been swept through my music" would be addressed to Caspar and Erika Neher.) Still chafing from the experience of seeing *Mahagonny* driven from the provincial stages (before it had even made it to Berlin) by a lethal combination of administrative cowardice and a carefully orchestrated *Kampfbund* campaign, Weill strategized the battle of *Bürgschaft* with his publisher as if the very fate of progressive German theater depended on its outcome.

This time a Berlin premiere would be highest priority, with as many simultaneous regional productions as possible in an attempt to preempt the inevitable demonstrations and journalistic attacks that would precipitate subsequent cancellations. Weill personally played through the score for interested producers. Most professed admiration and determination, but ultimately deemed it "too risky." Karl Böhm, the *Generalmusikdirektor* in Hamburg, for example, informed Hans Heinsheimer at UE that he had "great misgivings about the dangerous political nature of the libretto, given the particular makeup of the Hamburg public." Others were not so honest: The intendant of the Breslau Opera, for one, reported that beautiful weather was causing decreased attendance and *Die Bürgschaft* was just too "gloomy." Despite their concerted efforts, Weill and his publisher could count on only Berlin, Wiesbaden, and Düsseldorf for the first season. Excellent reviews and audience response, added performances, and good box office persuaded three additional wary houses to sign contracts for the 1932–33 season, but all canceled their productions soon after Hitler was named Chancellor.

The opera was swept from the German stage before it could establish itself, so Weill and UE shifted their offensives to non-German territories: Leningrad, Zurich, Vienna (under Clemens Krauss), even Philadelphia (with Stokowski). None succeeded. (There were two performances, however, in 1935 at the German Theater in the Moravian capital, Brno.) In Paris, Count Harry Kessler recorded in his diary on 11 October 1933: "One evening at Madame Homberg's Kurt Weill played us large parts of his *Bürgschaft*. . . . The effect left by the work is like that of a book by

an Old Testament prophet—Isaiah, Jeremiah, 'messianic.' . . . A work of immense power and stature. . . . But Madame Homberg considered it too dangerous to perform the work in Paris at that moment because it would frighten the public with its revolutionary ardor and harm the cause of the refugees."

Though the dangers of its topicality may have dissipated somewhat in the intervening decades, its difficulties as a work of "critical realism" have not. "To show things as they are, and only through the manner of representation to suggest to the audience a critique of what was being presented," as Weill described the challenge of *Die Bürgschaft*, is perhaps even more of a hurdle for present-day producers, performers, and audiences. It is Weill's most sober and sobering work. Its final pronouncement, "Everything is governed by one rule only, the rule of power, the rule of money," is unlikely to pull down the longstanding barricades that have hitherto kept Weill out of the repertoire of the State Operas of Berlin, Munich, or Vienna. Unfortunately, these are the very German-speaking theaters with the resources required for *Die Bürgschaft*: double chorus and a large cast with two equally demanding low-voiced male roles (how about Hampson and Terfel as Mattes and Orth?), three essential but unflashy women's parts, and a gang of three men capable of performing in *Cabaret* and *Fidelio* on alternate nights.

That Spoleto could so successfully surmount these and more obstacles for just three performances with less than six months' lead time, a 785-seat college theater with limited technical capabilities, and a tight production budget is a testament to the fierce commitment of everyone involved in the enterprise—and to the viability of the work itself. Perhaps the biggest surprise to me, however, was the opera's length. Its reputation is that it is long, *too* long: at its Berlin premiere, nearly four hours; after additional cuts had been introduced during the series of twelve performances there, three hours and twenty minutes. Weill and Neher then resolved to rewrite and greatly condense the second act so that the whole work could be performed with a single intermission in less than three hours. Absent the incentive of any firm production plans, Weill and Neher never effected this definitive version. (The piano-vocal score, published prior to rehearsals in 1931, reflects no revisions or cuts.) Remarkably, however, the Spoleto evening lasted (with one intermission, five minutes of minor cuts, and idiomatically brisk tempos) less than three hours. The recording just fits on two compact disks.

Die Bürgschaft, to be sure, has problems. When one of Weill's friends in Berlin, Felix Joachimson, had finished enumerating some of them, the composer responded: "We didn't think it was perfect. But it's damn good." The two recent productions have confirmed Weill's appraisal. In a review of the 1998 Bielefeld production (also directed by Jonathon Eaton), Horst Koegler suggested that the artistic directors of Germany's leading opera houses should be required to attend a performance of *Die Bürgschaft*. If, after the complete opera is available on commercial CDs, what a Charleston critic described as a "volcanic spectacle of music and drama" is once again shunned, the prejudices against Weill and his most important work must finally be acknowledged as something other than artistic in nature. Then, as our century draws to a close, Lenya's longing for a "purifying bath in the River Jordan or the Ganges" would again seem an appropriate *gestus*. The time of and for *Die Bürgschaft* will not have passed.

Kim H. Kowalke is President of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music.

Die Bürgschaft at Spoleto USA

PREMIERE: 30 May 1999

by David W. Maves



Mattes (Frederick Burchinal), the Commissar (John Daniecki), and Orth (Dale Travis) led by conductor Julius Rudel in Act II of the Spoleto USA production of *Die Bürgschaft*. Photo: Nan Melville.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the Spoleto USA production of Kurt Weill's opera *Die Bürgschaft* was for most attendees the high point of the seventeen-day festival. For others, including this writer, it was even more: a shattering experience, the kind from which one hopes never to recover. The joy was compounded by the fact that the work had been, up to this point, a mystery, and the surprise and delight of the discovery of a "new" opera was like a series of electric shocks. Most of the audience did not doubt the work's significance. History, posterity, and even the critics aside, we knew immediately that this was an important work, wonderfully performed.

How has this stunning work remained virtually unknown for two-thirds of the century? You begin to understand the answer once you learn the subject of the opera, the time (1932), and surroundings of its premiere. The libretto's devastating presentation of arbitrary, totalitarian cruelty infuriated the Nazis, but the main thrust of the opera is that humans must work to find areas of mutual agreement and trust. Once these trusts break down at either the social or individual level, the opera insists, civilization faces horrors as sadly evident today as they were in 1932. Small wonder that despite successful and critically acclaimed performances, the increasingly powerful National Socialist Party let it be known that any further productions would have disastrous repercussions for all concerned. A precise meaning of the title *Die Bürgschaft*, almost untranslatable by a single English word, was well understood by any German living in the early 1930s to mean the complicated but humane system of making and keeping promises to friends and acquaintances, of agreeing to help neighbors by giving them time to make amends or pay debts, of helping one another through troubled times. This, of course, is precisely what does *not* happen in the opera.

Kurt Weill, when he wanted to be, was probably the supreme musical cynic of all time. (Think of the "Moritat" in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where we laugh *with* the murderer and smile at his dastardly deeds.) In *Die Bürgschaft*, the intensity of Weill's depiction of cynicism is extreme, reaching such a crescendo at the end of the second act that I was silently begging for an intermission. (This production had only one intermission, at the end of the first act.) One longed for a few moments of relief from this accelerating descent into hell. At

the end of the last act, I was literally unable to speak for fear of weeping outright. *Die Bürgschaft* is so beautiful, so intense, and so cynical. Therein, I think, lies its greatness and its uniqueness.

The libretto (sung in German with English supertitles) is by both Caspar Neher and Kurt Weill and is inspired by a Talmudic parable recounted by Johann Gottfried von Herder as "The African

derful touches. For example, throughout the opera there is a female character referred to only as "Alto Solo," who breaks away from the choir (in other words, emerges from the masses) and begs the protagonists to act humanely. Pleading with passionate futility, she tries to combat the crushing cynicism of the chorus. She carries before her a picture of a handshake (a reminder of the *Bürgschaft*

itself) as though attempting to ward off evil. Another master-stroke was the "gang of three," a stunningly choreographed trio of men with superb voices (Peter Lurié, Lawrence Craig, and Herbert Perry) who snarled, connived, whined, cheated, and threatened their way through the entire opera as creditors, highwaymen, blackmailers, bailiffs, and agents. Dancer-choreographer Robert Ivey's experience on Broadway seems to have fed directly into his concept for the trio and their sleazy characterizations. Every time these three made an entrance, they "stole" the stage. Belied in this case was the old Broadway saw



The "Gang of Three," played by Peter Lurié, Lawrence Craig, and Herbert Perry, make their first appearance in the Prologue, with Margaret Thompson as Anna Mattes looking on. Photo: Nan Melville.

Judgment." The scenario of *Die Bürgschaft* is somewhat stilted and disjointed; Weill's music doesn't really solve its dramatic problems, but it does lift it into the realm of high art. Taken together, music and drama provide just the sort of material for a director like Jonathan Eaton, whose Spoleto USA production was clearly the result of much study and deep reflection. The performing venue was Charleston's Sottile Theatre, an old but comfortable cinema-turned-concert hall with an adequate-sized but technically under-equipped stage. Eaton managed to turn these shortcomings into pluses. The only solid edifice on the main stage was a large, movable scaffold, looking rather like a huge erector set. The structure served to center the action and was sturdy enough for the performers to scurry up and down on it. The double chorus fanned out on either side of the proscenium, where they were housed in two-story cage-like structures, a striking visual effect and one that made for maximum vocal projection. Scene changes were made by changes in lighting. A variety of large and small cubes served multiple functions as chairs, tables, dwellings, rooms, even platforms upon which to mince, prance, dance, fight, and pontificate.

Practice, they say, makes perfect, and it was Spoleto USA's good fortune that Eaton had first staged *Die Bürgschaft* last year in Bielefeld, Germany (where Spoleto USA officials viewed it before deciding to include it in this year's festival). There were many won-

derful touches. For example, throughout the opera there is a female character referred to only as "Alto Solo," who breaks away from the choir (in other words, emerges from the masses) and begs the protagonists to act humanely. Pleading with passionate futility, she tries to combat the crushing cynicism of the chorus. She carries before her a picture of a handshake (a reminder of the *Bürgschaft*

itself) as though attempting to ward off evil. Another master-stroke was the "gang of three," a stunningly choreographed trio of men with superb voices (Peter Lurié, Lawrence Craig, and Herbert Perry) who snarled, connived, whined, cheated, and threatened their way through the entire opera as creditors, highwaymen, blackmailers, bailiffs, and agents. Dancer-choreographer Robert Ivey's experience on Broadway seems to have fed directly into his concept for the trio and their sleazy characterizations. Every time these three made an entrance, they "stole" the stage. Belied in this case was the old Broadway saw that it is easier to teach dancers to sing than to teach singers to dance. Pablo Picasso often maintained that women were machines for suffering. I see a similar attitude in works of Kurt Weill. Certainly in *Die Bürgschaft* the two women pay the ultimate price for existence. Ann Panagoulas, in fine voice, gave a beautiful and moving portrayal of Mattes's daughter, evolving gradually from a spirited young girl into a near zombie, insensitive to her own life and the death of her mother. Margaret Thompson as Anna Mattes had the only traditionally operatic role (in the sense of having much beautiful, lyric music to sing), and she sang with thrilling sincerity. Throughout the opera she seemed to be the only truly human presence left in the world, making her gradual disintegration and death all the more heartbreaking. As the mystical, almost iconic, Alto Solo, Katherine Ciesinski sang and acted with great power. Frederick Burchinal as Mattes and Dale Travis as Orth were beefy and vocally strong in their demanding central roles. By the last performance (I saw all three), Travis had become so chillingly horrific as he pronounced the "benediction" ("everything happens according to a law, the law of money, the law of power") that, for a time at least, one lost all hope for humanity.

In the final analysis it is Kurt Weill's music that raises *Die Bürgschaft* to what I would call highest art. As a product of the early

1930s, this work periodically assumes the patina of German cabaret music of that time, and many of the surehanded instrumental and



Conductor Julius Rudel. Photo: Nan Melville.

choral interludes have the sound and the dry wit of the chamber and choral works of Paul Hindemith. But, unlike the intellectual distance often maintained by Hindemith's compositions, Weill's music makes a more direct attack on the emotions, frequently employing open fourths and fifths instead of triads in key pas-

sages and cadences. Superbly crafted contrapuntal explorations are lightly tinged with dissonance, but they frequently give way to snarling cabaret-style tangos, bittersweet waltzes, or ironic polytonal marches, especially when the "gang of three" is about to pull off one of its dirty tricks. True, there are triads aplenty, but always presented with enough of an interesting twist to make them sound fresh, not trite. For instance, the first act ends with a relentlessly hammered C-major chord, which in this context becomes a sardonic scream. The words and music for double chorus, triumphantly realized at Spoleto by the Westminster Choir, relate directly to events taking place on stage. Although at times taking an active part in the drama, the chorus also provides narration and supplies philosophical commentary, acting in the manner of an ancient Greek chorus. Musically the role of the chorus harks back to the double choruses in J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and one may also find parallels with the choruses in Mozart's *Idomeneo*, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, and even more especially with the chorus as a main protagonist in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

Weill's instrumentation was always interesting, often stunning in its sparse and unusual combinations of instruments, especially of winds or brass; for example, a pair of trumpets crackling in a derisive duet or an unusual combination of winds and piano. Percussion is used infrequently but with telling effect, sometimes providing a harsh, insistent urgency, or leading the orchestra in an over-the-top crescendo that literally leaves one gasping. Much of the void left by an unusually spare use of the traditional string section is taken up with the staccato sound of two pianos providing a busy counterpoint or by the dry glitter of out-of-kilter melodies played over sustained or slowly moving chords. I was consistently as fascinated and intrigued by what went on in the orchestra as by the stage action.

The third member of this triumphant troika (along with Kurt Weill and Jonathan Eaton) was conductor Julius Rudel, whose talent, coupled with fifty years of operatic conducting experience, seemed to transform his baton into a magic wand that effortlessly unified this large, superlative cast and crew. Bobbing and weaving like a boxer, he marshaled his far-flung forces with economy and flair so that together the chorus, the soloists, and the Spoleto Festival orchestra sang and played with thrilling power. I can't

imagine a better performance. The Spoleto USA production was indeed the compelling result of the happiest kind of artistic collaboration between the living and the dead.

David W. Maves is composer-in-residence at the College of Charleston, South Carolina. He has published an opera (*Bodas de Sangre*, based on Lorca's play), and over 100 other compositions.

Die Bürgschaft: Synopsis

Die Bürgschaft is set in the mythical land of Urb. A cattle dealer, Mattes, has gambled away his money and is being hounded by creditors. Anna, his wife, persuades him to seek help from Orth, a grain dealer. The chorus intones, as it will throughout the opera: "It is only social relations that will change a man's attitude." Orth bails out Mattes: he makes a pledge to the creditors to become responsible for the debts. This is the pledge, the *Bürgschaft*, of the title.

Six years later, Mattes buys two sacks of almost worthless chaff. These sacks turn out to be the hiding place for Orth's life savings. Orth is sure that Mattes will return the money when he finds it, but Mattes pretends not to have found the money and only confesses after three blackmailers threaten to reveal his duplicity. Orth then asks a judge to decide what shall become of the money. The Judge decrees that neither deserves the money, but that it shall be set aside for Orth's son and Mattes' daughter, evidently under the impression that the two will one day marry. Luise, the daughter, immediately indicates that she is uninterested in marrying Jakob, the son.

High Politics now enter the scene. An unnamed Great Power has seized control of Urb, and the new law is one of money and power. A Commissar arrives, retries the case, confiscates the money for the new regime, and declares that Mattes and Orth will be allowed to remain free only if they swear allegiance to the Great Power.

Another six years pass. The chorus sings that times have changed, while men have not. The rich have grown richer, the poor have grown poorer. There has been war. As if in a pageant, the inhabitants of Urb must pass through four gates: War, Inflation, Hunger, Disease. The aftermath of war brings hunger and inflation. Mattes and Orth become profiteers and grow rich. Anna dies. Luise slides into prostitution. The people of Urb rise up against Mattes. Once again, Mattes' only hope is Orth, but this time Orth refuses to pledge for his friend. He rejects Mattes' pleas for help and gives him over to the crowd, which murders him. Orth ends this tragedy by brutally and fiercely reiterating the maxim: "All occurs according to law: the law of money and power."

D.M.

Press Clippings from Spoleto USA

Kurt Weill's *Die Bürgschaft*, recently given its U.S. stage premiere at the Spoleto Festival, is a stunning work that knits together Weill's intense social and political concerns with compositional skill and invention of the highest order. First performed in 1932 in Berlin, and followed by other productions in Wiesbaden and Düsseldorf, it was simultaneously compared to the *Ring* and subjected to such intense political and racist attack in the press that it was not mounted again [in its entirety] until 1998. No wonder. Unlike Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera*, this work does not veil its message in satire, or tell its story through lowlifes, criminals, or hapless lumberjacks. Instead, it depicts with devastating clarity the decline of a society that is based on power and money, without trust and mutual respect between people, and between the individual and the state. The Nazis rising to power must have been thrilled.

Echoes of 1930's *Mahagonny* resonate through the score, both in its structure and its sound, but Weill's gift for melody and his orchestral sophistication are more operative in *Die Bürgschaft*. The popular dances and tunes so characteristic of Weill's other stage works are less obvious here; the work feels through-composed rather than episodic. Anchored by a powerful double chorus, which narrates and comments on the action, the work is a sobering and monumental mix of theater and oratorio, like Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. The strong leadership of conductor Julius Rudel, the expressive Westminster Choir and Spoleto Festival Orchestra, and a uniformly excellent cast made this an event to remember.

—Heidi Waleson, *The Wall Street Journal* (8 June 1999)

This is not minor Weill, but a full-blown three-act opera in his typical German-period style—nervous dance-hall rhythms and claustrophobically dense harmonies with a choral commentary

that clearly looks forward to his last Broadway musical, *Lost in the Stars*. The neglect of *Die Bürgschaft* is explained only by the libretto's political content: The allegorical depiction of life during Hitler's rise was inevitably banned by the Nazis, and its pro-socialist stance kept it out of style after World War II.

The presentational, Brecht-influenced theatrical style can seem heavy-handed now—it was directed to audiences who had few outlets for anti-Fascist outrage—but here it is staged on a skeletal set that appears to be an homage to Andrei Serban's great production of *Turandot* at London's Royal Opera. Grimy, pale-faced chorus members are lined up along the sides, looking like Kabuki performers who have been banished to a coal mine. Bad guys have red stripes across their eyes. And the trio of human vultures—reminiscent of *Turandot*'s three courtiers—is staged by Eaton with a sardonically playful edge that heightens the piece's theatricality.

The production avoids anything so obvious as swastikas, though what resembles a giant piñata breaks apart to reveal a glittering globe. It's a golden-calf moment unveiling the underlying motivation of the 1930s Germany as money *über alles*.

—David Patrick Stearns, *USA Today* (22 June 1999)

The opera is profoundly disturbing, as its leftist composer intended. Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Pat Buchanan, and the House impeachment team also might be happy to shut it down.

Conceived and directed by Jonathan Eaton of the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, the production is close to brilliant: brooding, violent, comfortless and not at all to the taste of Spoleto's we're-here-to-play audiences. Designers Danila Korogodsky (sets and costumes) and John McLain (lights) have made a world in which nothing is finished: scaffolding and packing boxes, faceless inmates in work-camp clothes, searchlights: the raw materials of isolation, firing squads, gas chambers. We can see Hitler coming, just as Weill could: a banner the width of the stage screams "*FREI*," but the rest of the word has been torn away (*Freiheit*, meaning freedom).

Having broken his partnership with the playwright Bertolt Brecht, Weill in the early 1930s was looking beyond the cabaret-style satires (*The Threepenny Opera*) they had created. In *Die Bürgschaft*, he wrote a full-scale political allegory on no less a subject than the disintegration of what John Locke called the social compact between the individual and the community.

Bürgschaft may be translated as pledge or bond. But considering the source of its story, I prefer its older meaning of covenant. It's based on a parable from the Talmud (a collection of rabbinic commentaries) as retold by the 18th-century German humanist Johann Gottfried von Herder: a complex set of origins that shows Weill thinking beyond the immediate troubles of Weimar Germany to the greater (and recurring) ones of human civilization across history.



In Act II, the Judge (center), played by Enrico Di Giuseppe, decrees that the money belongs to neither Orth or Mattes. Photo: Nan Melville.

The opera's music and its drama are at cross-purposes. As the tale moves from the particular to the general, from individuals to classes, the music becomes more potent and glorious: big blazing choruses of passion and despair, outshouted by the orchestra at its most apocalyptic. But the people get lost, and with them the opera. If opera has a defining trait, it's the primacy of the individual; once the group takes over, what we have is a combination of pageant and oratorio.



—Judith Green, *Atlanta Constitution* (1 June 1999) In Act I, Orth and his son (Joel Sorensen) contemplate their predicament. Photo: Nan Melville.

It is impossible for anyone, German or American, not to make the connection between this opera and German history. The opera depicts the entrance of the “Commissar of the Great Power,” and a war takes place between 1933 and 1939—six years. *Die Bürgschaft* prophesies—six years after the break out of war, the world will lie in ruins and hunger and sickness will be rampant—1939 to 1945—six years.

The world premiere on 10 May 1932, in the Berlin Städtische Oper, was directed by Carl Ebert, the son of the former president of the Weimar Republic, who also produced a revival of *Die Bürgschaft* in Berlin in 1957. Shortly after its world premiere in Berlin, Weill's opera was forced to close under enormous political pressure and all remaining performances were canceled. At that time, the newspaper *Der Völkische Beobachter* asked, “How can a composer of such anti-German work continue to be subsidized by the German taxpayer?” Conversely, the *New York Times* critic declared that Weill's opera possessed the depth of Wagner's *Ring*.

“*Die Bürgschaft* is a very ambitious piece and a universal work of warning,” explains director Jonathan Eaton. . . . Part passion play, part historical parable, Julius Rudel, the conductor of the South Carolina production, calls *Die Bürgschaft* one of the most important works of the twentieth century.

—Robert von Rimscha, *Der Tagesspiegel* (15 June 1999)

In its own time, *Die Bürgschaft* must have seemed terrifyingly potent: imagine an opera set today, say, in the complicated killing fields of Rwanda or Chechnya. Weill's and Neher's evocations of the Fascist threat, the opportunism of the collaborators (embodied splendidly by the production's henchmen, played by Peter Lurié, Lawrence Craig and Herbert Perry) and the struggles of the oppressed masses are prescient and almost journalistically precise.

—Peter Marks, *The New York Times* (12 June 1999)

Spoletto Festival USA's American stage premiere of Kurt Weill's *Die Bürgschaft* (*The Covenant*) Sunday night erupted in a volcanic spectacle of music and drama rivaling the best Spoletto USA has ever offered.

Weill's opera first appeared in Germany in 1932, a few days before Adolf Hitler took power. It was heralded as a work of genius by the non-Nazi press and condemned by Dr. Goebbels' controlled propaganda media. Against this turbulent backdrop, Weill's opera, despite sporting oratorio qualities, was savage and hectoring in its message delivery. Under Jonathan Eaton's brilliant direction, this Spoletto USA production delivered a punch that left the Sottile Theatre audience stunned and suitably ecstatic during the ten-minute-long curtain calls.

No small part of the success of this production goes to conductor Julius Rudel, possibly the finest and most versatile opera conductor around today. Keeping things moving in this large-scale staging requires a level of professionalism and experience Rudel clearly exhibits.

Powerful drama requires powerful music. Weill pulled on his considerable creative musical skills and sense of theater, producing what has been called his most ambitious work. Using a double chorus, solos, duets, trios, and combined ensembles, Weill's in-your-face creation left little to chance, carefully calculating musical, vocal, and dramatic effects piled one on another.

—William Furtwangler, *The Post and Courier* (31 May 1999)

There is a plot, but not much of one, and the music, the libretto, and Mr. Eaton's staging all eschew personal emotion and focus on brute force. This is a harsh, bitter work, and it leaves one shattered and feeling helpless. At the first intermission on opening night, a woman told me, “This is a descent into Hell.” And she was right.

—Robert Jones, *The Post and Courier* (1 June 1999)

Der Weg der Verheißung

Premiere:

The Eternal Road

7 January 1937

Manhattan Opera House,
New York

Max Reinhardt, director

Isaac van Grove, conductor

Norman Bel Geddes, designer

Revival:

Der Weg der Verheißung

13 June 1999

Chemnitz, Germany

Michael Heinicke, director

John Mauceri, conductor

David Sharir, designer

On Tour:

Brooklyn Academy of Music, New
York, February–March 2000

New Israeli Opera, Tel Aviv,
April 2000

EXPO 2000, Hannover, July 2000

Kraków Opera, September 2000

The death of Moses. Act II, *The Eternal Road*, 1937.

Sleepless in Chemnitz

PREMIERE: 13 June 1999

by Horst Koegler

A seasoned theatergoer for more than fifty years and an ardent Kurt Weill fan since the Düsseldorf premiere of *Street Scene* in 1955, I found myself speechless as I left the Chemnitz opera house on 13 June after the first performance of the revived *Der Weg der Verheißung*. Rarely have I left the theater in such an emotionally agitated state. There was no question of joining the party afterwards. I went straight back to my hotel for a sleepless night spent trying to restore order in my head now buzzing with thoughts and ideas that criss-crossed like rush-hour traffic in Times Square. I truly envied my colleagues who were able to view it as just another theater evening, evaluating it as if it were, say, Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, which we had attended the night before in Nuremberg, or *Swan Lake* by the Maryinsky as our next obligatory date at Baden-Baden.

I had so many questions.

How could one not be intrigued by the extraordinary history of the creation of this work, from Weill's first mention of it in a December 1933 letter to Lenya until its eventual premiere in New York in January 1937? How could one imagine the three artists' collaboration, with Weill in France and England putting the finishing touches on his operetta *A Kingdom for a Cow* and Werfel and Reinhardt in Austria watching the disastrous developments in Nazi Germany which threatened at any moment to spread to their country?

By which standards could one judge this distinctly Jewish biblical spectacle? Was it a Jewish *Volksstück* equivalent to Reinhardt's productions of *The Miracle* or of Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*? Should it be viewed in the context of Handel's *Saul*, Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*, Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, or Honegger's *Roi David*? (Surely not Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*.) Or should one rather see it as a precursor of Jerry Bock's *Fiddler on the Roof*, Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*? Was it maybe even a distant relative of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*?

The listing of all these titles only serves to demonstrate the work's uniqueness. It fits into no category: opera, oratorio, musical

play, pageant, biblical drama, masque, mystery play. . . . Nor can one attach any single stylistic label to it, as Weill ranges purposefully from Bach and Handel through Mendelssohn and Gounod, Wagner and Mahler to—well, to Weill. This is not so much the hard-edged Weill of *Mahagonny* (although there is some reminiscence of it in the laconic melodies of the solo pieces) as it is the monumental Weill of *Die Bürgschaft*, especially in the many massive choruses that stand as constitutive elements of the score.

Perhaps one could claim the work's essential Jewishness as its common musical denominator. The Rabbi's substantial melodramatic readings from the Torah, along with the prayers and chorales, lend the music a distinctly Jewish flavor. This has less to do with direct musical quotation than with the way Weill assimilates elements of Hebrew intonation. He mixes them freely with borrowings from a rich array of occidental music traditions and his inexhaustible melodic invention. The score has an idiom all its own (forced to label it, one might call it "Yiddish") that sets it apart from every other work in Weill's (or anybody else's) oeuvre. Yet

it sounds unmistakably Weillian. (Some insist on pinning him down as Brecht's musical twin, with any departure from that style—even before he left Europe—seen as evidence of encroaching decay. This is the critics' problem, not Weill's.)

The piece possesses an eminently workable structure. Scenes in a synagogue provide the frame. A Jewish congregation has retreated for shelter from threats of a pogrom. They listen to their rabbi, who evokes visions from their history as he reads from the Torah: from Abraham and Moses, via David and Saul, to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, through the destruction of the temple. These synagogue scenes, peopled with sharply etched individual charac-



Moses (Matteo de Monti) confronts the burning bush in the Chemnitz Opera production of *Der Weg der Verheißung*. Photo: Dieter Wuschanski.

ters expressing clashing opinions—The Pious Man, The Estranged One, The Adversary, The Timid Soul, The Rich Man, The Young Man and his Christian betrothed, not forgetting the eminently important Thirteen-year-old Boy—fuel the drama, making it vivid and colorful. The action is poignant and even prophetic if one considers that the piece was written before the whole sinister extent of the Nazis' plans became known. I found the internal debates and controversies deeply moving and spellbinding. The terrifying finale was especially powerful, with the oppressors finally invading the hiding place. (Recent events in Kosovo no doubt lent a special ghoulish flavor to it.)

Werfel's writing in these scenes is dense and compact, the dialogues sharp, pointed, and down to earth, as grounding for the lofty Torah readings. It is in the biblical episodes that Werfel's prose becomes somewhat stilted, verbose, and opaque, so that one feels grateful for dramaturg Gerhard Müller's substantial cuts. In evidence here is the pious preaching tone that renders so much of the author's later writings indigestible for us today.

The performance sounded perfectly integrated, with conductor John Mauceri presiding majestically over huge forces assembled in the pit and onstage. These included the Robert-Schumann-Philharmonie, the chorus and children's chorus of the Chemnitz Oper, the chorus of the Opera Kraków, and the Leipzig Synagogalchor, plus the roughly four dozen soloists (some of them in two or even three roles). Beyond a doubt, all were engaged and motivated. Like a magician Mauceri hovered over them, drawing luscious sounds, whipping them into a frenzy, putting iron into their marches. He lovingly shaped individual instrumental lines (I recall particularly a few wonderfully chaste oboe solos) and only occasionally oversugared the harp-coatings. He is obviously as much in love with Weill the melodist as I am. (I am actually convinced that Weill was the greatest melodist of our century, topping even the Beatles, maybe the Bellini of the twentieth century?)

Given the various locations to which this production will tour, director Michael Heinicke had to bear in mind that it would be seen by a much wider audience than his usual Chemnitz subscribers. (Not to mention the very specialized audience of self-appointed guardians of progressive music theater—I mean critics, of course—to whom opera is anathema.) A former assistant of Harry Kupfer (himself the heir of Walter Felsenstein, pioneer and intendant of the Komische Oper), Heinicke distinguished the work's two levels visually. The synagogue, dominating the foreground, was closed and sinister. The rear of the stage opened up for the unfolding of the biblical scenes, ablaze in oriental colors and lavish costumes. Characters of the Jewish community in the synagogue were individually profiled and realistically acted, while the biblical figures on the upper stage were played more as cartoon characters. This approach enraged many German critics, some likening the biblical players to amateur actors of the Oberammergau passion play variety, others comparing them to actors in the Hollywood movies of Cecil B. De Mille.

While I can imagine a different, more abstract handling of these scenes, I believe that Heinicke—in collaboration with the Israeli stage designer David Sharir—remained true to the conception of *Der Weg* as a Jewish equivalent of the Salzburg *Jedermann* (it is worth recalling that this work has often been criticized for too populist a staging). The work's indigenous Jewishness was emphasized through Sharir's decor, with its strongly colored props and faux-naïve stage-paintings based on themes from Hebrew folklore. Heinicke's highly effective staging more than once caused real shivers when he underlined the terrible topicality of the work's message. That message might be appreciated abroad better than it was by those first-night fundamentalists of music theater at Chemnitz. Indeed, even at the first performance, the skeptics were decidedly in the minority, as most of the crowd feted the performers with standing ovations.

How can one make proper comment upon each of the dozens of soloists and principal cast members? The greatest marvel was undoubtedly the ensemble quality of the whole team, the guest performers being perfectly integrated with the locals. That held true even for such veterans as Theo Adam (Abraham and Samuel), Siegfried Lorenz (Dark Angel and Solomon), and Siegfried Vogel (Angel of Death and Saul). They never stuck out as stars in cameo appearances.

My greatest tribute goes to Peter-Jürgen Schmidt as the Rabbi, a very demanding role requiring the player to be onstage for the three-plus-hour duration of the performance. In his function as *testo* he had to find his own style of *Sprechgesang* for the psalmodic renderings of his readings and prayers. These could easily have grown monotonous but did not thanks to the subtle modulations of his voice. A great performance! As the Adversary, Dieter Montag, an actor from Berlin, was the Rabbi's acid-tongued dialectical opponent. Christopher Jakob, a boy from a Chemnitz high school,



Designer David Sharir's third-act curtain depicts King David.

was a highly sympathetic Thirteen-year-old Boy, visibly maturing during the performance. The scene of his bar mitzvah was a moment of stirring emotion. Two other performers in the synagogue who likewise appealed to our deepest feelings were Dietrich

Greve (as the Young Man/Boaz) and Britta Jacobus (as the Foreign Girl/Ruth). These young lovers, he a Jew and she a Christian, must defend their love against the orthodox fundamentalism of some in the congregation. They finally marry in a traditional Jewish cere-



Abraham (Theo Adam) drops his knife after the Lord instructs him to spare his son, Isaac (Raphael Hering). Photo: Dieter Wuschanski.

mony, another one of those gripping moments during which I could barely breathe.

In the biblical episodes I enjoyed especially the Sarah of Donna Morein (also later as Naomi), Piotr Bednarski's Jacob (and Isaiah), H  lene Bernardy as Rachel (and Voice of a Girl), Matteo de Monti's Moses and Andreas M  ckel's Aaron (and Zedekiah), Ulf Deutscher's Jonathan (also the Pious Man), Edward Randall's David (also White Angel), Egon Schulz's grotesquely etched Hananiah and the tremendous performance of Boris Statsenko as Jeremiah, wildly overacted, but with a voice like the trumpet of the apocalypse.

And what of the critical reception? That was a rather mixed bag of opinions. The press from eastern Germany generally received the production more positively than did their western colleagues. Also, the younger generation tended to be much more critical than their senior colleagues. By far the most substantial and carefully

reasoned opinions came from two critics well into their fifties, Gerhard R. Koch in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. They did not hesitate to express their reservations; Koch summed up by calling the piece a "Teutonic Tears-Miracle-Revue," and Jungheinrich stated that "The *Road of Promise* materialized rather as a road of doubts and disillusion." Few went so far as to liken the work to a "Festspiel of the Salvation Army" (Frieder Reininghaus in the *Berlin Tageszeitung*) or to suggest that the final march with a different text "might have been bel-lowed by the SA [Hitler's Storm Troopers]" (Reinhard Beuth in *Die Welt*).

One point in the background of many of the reviews was a general resistance to the hype with which the project was launched. Too much publicity attended the joint venture of New York, Chemnitz, Tel Aviv and Krak  w, marking as it did the start of the worldwide celebration of the Weill centenary. Too much was also made of the political connotations of the event, with a special symposium, press conferences, and speeches by various politicians. While it was not hard to understand that Chemnitz, otherwise dwarfed culturally by Dresden and Leipzig, wished to seize an opportunity, there was a perceptible uneasiness among the press that the whole undertaking had been blown out of proportion.

Another factor has to be considered. Apart from the Kosovo conflict, public debate of recent months in Germany has concentrated on two events, both connected with the Holocaust. First there was the speech made by Martin Walser, one of Germany's top writers (whose reputation may be compared with that of John Updike in the States) in accepting the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. He remarked: "Nobody to be taken seriously denies Auschwitz. When, however, the media reproach us day in and day out with this past, I begin to realize that something in me resists this permanent presentation of our disgrace. I am beginning to look away." This caused an outcry from the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, especially so because the speech was given just a few days before the sixtieth anniversary of *Reichskristallnacht*. Though nobody in his right mind could accuse Walser of any right-wing—let alone anti-semitic—tendencies, the debate raged for weeks in newspapers, broadcasts, television programs, and public discussions. The reverberations were ringing when an even more contentious issue caused a greater furor, reaching even into the Bundestag: the argument over the Holocaust memorial to be erected in Berlin. Neither event had any direct connection with the Chemnitz premiere, but the public climate had become so hyper-sensitized to Jewish issues in Germany that objective assessments became almost impossible.

Those who had hoped that the final arrival of *Der Weg der Verheissung* in Germany (sixty-two years after its New York premiere) might mark a definitive revision of the prejudicial thinking that divides the European from the American Weill were disappointed. However, I wonder if the proper place for the piece is before Broadway crowds or loyal Chemnitz operagoers. I can imagine a production in line with the early concept of it as a *Volksschauspiel*, perhaps in some open-air location in Israel. Or, why not make it the centerpiece of the annual festival at Caesarea?

Horst Koegler is the retired music and dance critic of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* and author of several books on music and dance.

Press Clippings from Chemnitz Opera

Hitler, the dramaturg. Even more provocative: Hitler the involuntary Zionist. Without Nazism, Schoenberg never would have lost his self-image as an *Austrian* composer, never would have turned toward works of Jewish background such as *Jakobsleiter* and *Moses und Aron*. One of Germany's leading musical theatricalists, Kurt Weill, whose centenary will be celebrated in 2000, was also driven along similar paths. . . .

As it turned out, the long evening of this *Eternal Road* (German title: *Der Weg der Verheißung*) rather turned out to be a road of doubt and disillusionment. There was even a certain feeling of embarrassment following the first two acts. During the second part the whole affair gained in pace and the vivid and effective ending finally lent the *succès d'estime* a note of heartiness. No, the Chemnitz performance was not a fiasco. This object of art is too important, too eminently tied to the most crucial and most painful experiences of our century to be brushed off carelessly. Thus one can report on various items of interest—even if that report is touched with partial disappointment, it is touched nonetheless. And not to be lost in the shuffle is the fact of a highly engaged theatrical achievement. . . .

Musically, Weill time and again draws upon his vast and splendid stage experience and talent. His sources of inspiration more than ever are Jewish folk and synagogue music. In addition, Weill recalls the integrative-classicist style of the Busoni school. Nor is the song idiom forgotten. . . . One can recognize the vision of an engaging, communicative, thoroughly tonal style of musical monumentality. Since significant parts of the play are spoken as dialogue, only sporadically do musical forms of larger proportions emerge. The choruses take on a brilliant role, especially in the third and fourth acts. Over and over again they are massive and of enormous impact. However, in contrast to those of Schoenberg, they often come across as proclamations, even as slogans. This is as much a product of a profession of belief as it is of a striving for popularity.

But something of an aggressor's aesthetic shines through the emphatic defiance, the acceleration to intensify strong emotions, the forced display—this last a fatal component that has not the least thing to do with Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*.

—Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (15 June 1999)

It is not as easy to deal with the music, since it presents a mix of styles which sheds new light on elements typical of Weill. Largely missing—and who would want to blame him?—is the ironic, sarcastic, in all events “distorted” tone. The mostly diatonic melos aims at the realms of Puccini and Tchaikovsky. Tonality is preserved, but what was once an acute refraction, a toppling of conventions, is gone. What had been a venomous citation of baroque kinetic becomes a reaffirming pattern. There are, moreover, moments of nearly minimalist repetitious euphoria, and a down-right ecstatic gospel quality arises in the syncopated choral hymn

“Das ist ein Gott.” Weill's means are divergent, not infrequently making use of quasi-quotations from oratorio, opera, and even Schubertian Lieder. Lulling triplet arpeggios, sturdy Handel marches are in evidence, and in the music of the crowd admonishing Jeremiah one can hear the “Boris” children harass the “fool.” There are allusions to the baroque also in an idyllic siciliano-allegretto in E minor, but Mahler's pained tone is here too. In the fourth part the entire gestus becomes more urgent, harsh and also more dissonant—as if Weill found more and more productive ways to yield to his subject as he got further and further into it.

Heterogeneity of both type and merit is part of the structural principle at work here. As one pays greater attention to the music, more and more significant qualities become apparent. These were conveyed in a most suggestive way by the performance of the imposing array of forces under John Mauceri.

—Gerhard R. Koch, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (15 June 1999)



Program cover of the Chemnitz Opera production of *Der Weg der Verheißung*. Design: David Sharir.

So far, so serious. In the meantime, illustrated Old Testament. Bible films on the stage. (Hollywood could do it better even back then.) Add Weill's music right along with it: from the “Classic Hits” section of the style guide. Now and then it sounded like Tchaikovsky, even a few bars from the antisemite Wagner turn out to be good for Jewish stories. And when Weill really gets going he has his eye on Stravinsky.

One element alone in this amalgam of styles gives the score character: the part of the Rabbi. Inspired by the melismatic singing style of eastern European cantors, it is performed impressively by Peter-Jürgen Schmidt. Also worthy of note in the ensemble is Theo Adam as Abraham and Samuel. It is possible that other productions would have ignored the shallow parts of the piece. It is

possible that the Chemnitz production team had to take into consideration partners who were governed by a more traditional concept of music theater. These are idle suppositions, because the discrepancy between the vision of this work and its realization remains.

What it should have been: a great epic about the greatness and suffering of the people of Israel. In the end, the people march forward to their future to a tune that, with other words, could have been sung just as well by Nazi storm troopers. Weill, Werfel and Reinhardt too created under the pressures of their times. And in the end, they betrayed the Jewish spirit by debasing it in the form of a stage show.

—Reinhard Beuth, *Die Welt* (15 June 1999)

Director Michael Heinicke took note of the political baggage, without being weighed down by it. The calculated naïveté of his reading only strays from the authors' point of view in the finale, when a black-clad gang forces its way into the synagogue and a shot breaks through the silence. But until this point there were scenes abounding in imagery, foreseeing the worst possible future in a reaction to what has been. For this is the heart and sense of the game: by bringing their own past to the fore, the Jews are preparing themselves for an uncertain future. With an eye to the patriarchs, to Moses, the kings and the prophets, their own suffering is relativized, their own hopes justified.

The particular attraction of this reassurance lies in a formal parallel. Weill's score itself reads like an inventory of those spiritual possessions that no one can deny the composer. On the way into exile, the composer in his mid-thirties bundled together his remembrances of his childhood in the household of a Jewish cantor and of his first impression of the Dessau theater, of his teacher Busoni and of his collaboration with Brecht.

Under the careful hand of the American conductor John Mauceri, the Robert Schumann Philharmonic revealed the facets and put them together to make a dazzling panorama. Alongside warlike choruses were demanding stanzas of sung verse; alongside late romantic schmaltz, reminiscence of the popular avant-garde of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. What otherwise might be heard as ironic refraction comes back here in pious innocence.

The director lets himself be guided by this mood. It is a gutsy decision to allow Israeli set designer David Sharir to add a certain folkloric emphasis. And the production actually stumbles each time this goes too far, when the timbre of the drumskin is set in technicolor for the eye. In all the dazzling situations when the theater is supposed to evoke the Hollywood film scenes from the Old Testament, the sham realism simply makes us laugh. But where the opera stage uses its own resources, where conflicts in the congregation are hinted at, and where ideal and real figures meet, that's where the work gains strength. . . .

The Chemnitz Opera gets the credit for saving a highly interesting work from obscurity with their total engagement and respect for the quality of the music and text. That they opted for a naive interpretation in the face of this religious theme was by no means the worst choice.

—Andreas Hillger, *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* (17 June 1999)

The score is from the same mould as *The Seven Deadly Sins* and the Second Symphony, richly tuneful, sometimes—inevitably—overwhelmingly melancholy, highly theatrical: Abraham and Isaac and the Building of the Temple are absolutely top-drawer Weill. Some might find the sugar-count too high in the Ruth and Boaz episode, which is paralleled by a couple in the “real life” action: the Aryan mayor's daughter has joined the community and married the Young Man.

But the music is very, very deeply felt. The secular Weill, like Schoenberg, was not a “Jewish composer” until politics forced him to be; he wrote *Weg der Verheissung* and Schoenberg wrote *Moses und Aron* almost as acts of self-identification; Weill's Burning Bush addresses Moses in waltz time; Schoenberg's doesn't. The big problem is that Weill's timing was wrong, through no fault of his own. Just as his musical setting of *Cry, the Beloved Country* was composed before the full tragedy of South Africa became apparent, so *Weg* was conceived before the Holocaust, before *Kristallnacht* even. It doesn't quite rise to an occasion that hadn't yet happened. The short, jaunty march to which the community marches away at the end is one of those moments that won't quite do. Even so, in its subject-matter alone—the knock on the door is heart-stopping—*Weg* cannot help but be a profoundly moving experience in the theater.

—Rodney Milnes, *Opera* (September 1999)



Saul (Siegfried Vogel) consults the Witch of Endor (Donna Morein). Photo: Dieter Wuschanski.



THE ETERNAL ROAD

Cover of the souvenir program for *The Eternal Road*, 1937, in which Lewisohn's synopsis appeared.



Myron Taylor as the Rabbi.



Thomas Chalmers as Abraham.

The Eternal Road - Synopsis

by Ludwig Lewisohn

Reprinted from the souvenir program published in January 1937. The fourth part was not performed. The photographs are from the original production, Manhattan Opera House, New York, 1937.

The Prologue

When the curtain rises on the first scene, there is no suggestion of spectacle or mystery play. An ancient synagogue in some Central or East European country, packed with the men, women and children of an entire community, is disclosed. It is night. A spirit of terror, insecurity, and impending disaster hovers in the air. Above the whispering, terrified voices of the congregation rise the low commands of the President of the community and of the venerable Rabbi, the occasional outcry of a woman who can no longer contain her hysteria, the snarling comments of the Skeptic in the community, the questions of the Timid Soul, the uneasy confessions of the Rich Man, the heartening comments of the Pious Men, the pleading of the Estranged One, the calls of the Thirteen-year-old Boy who is the son of the Estranged One.

The congregation is assembled for a night of fasting and prayer. A decree, evil and uncertain, hangs over the community. There is enmity in the night outside. At any moment a wild peasantry, filled with hatred and bloodlust, and inflamed with fanaticism, may burst open the doors; at any moment flames may envelop the building. There is only one hope—if hope it can be called—namely, that the Tyrant ruler of this territory may intervene and commute possible destruction into a sentence of exile, so that, in order to escape death and worse than death, the entire community will have to leave its homes, its synagogue, its possessions, the graves of its fathers and everything dear to it after centuries of residence in this place, and set its feet once more on the Eternal Road of Promise.

To pass the dreadful hours of suspense, to engage the Divine Mercy, and to strengthen the hearts of the congregation against the worst that might happen, the Rabbi takes from the Ark the Scrolls of the Law.

The Rabbi is reading not merely to distract; he is reading in order that he may awaken in his congregants the strength which sustained the great Biblical heroes, by making them feel that they, the watchers in the night, are one with those giants of the past. There is, in fact, neither past or present. All Time is one. The congregants are not at a play representing the fate of *others*. They themselves are in a sense the actors of the past. And the same feeling is communicated to the spectators in the theater. They too are not watching a play. They are themselves both the watchers in the synagogue and the heroes of the Bible.

Part I

Four main episodes, into each of which are crowded the highlights of the fate of several generations, make up the drama. In the first episode the dominant note is the utterance and confirmation of the eternal bond between the Jewish people—which is yet to spring from the loins of Abraham and his immediate progeny—and God. Abraham and Sarah are presented in the setting of that ancient Orient—old people silent in their disappointment over their childlessness, which contradicts and denies the divine promise. But when the miracle has occurred, when the barrenness of Sarah has been removed after the visit of the three angels, when the boy Isaac has grown into beautiful boyhood, the first significant symbolic incident is presented; Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, the love of his old age, on an altar on Mount Moriah.

The first dramatic incident illustrates the method of the play. God's command comes down to Abraham from the portals of heaven, asking for the sacrifice of Isaac. While Abraham seems to be breaking under this agonizing test of his loyalty to God, the light darkens on the Biblical stage and emerges on the Synagogue, where an outcry of pain and sympathy accompanies the inner struggle and successful self-conquest of Abraham. Then the lights are reversed; Abraham is released from the command, and in joy prepares another sacrifice to the Almighty. A second time the light is reversed, and in the synagogue there is relief, praise, and admiration for the steadfastness and faith of the first Jew.

There is rapid contrast in the tone and content of the incidents which make up the first episode. The tender story of the love of Jacob and Rachel unfolds in a pastoral setting, accompanied by music recalling the flutes of the shepherds who guarded their flocks ages ago under Chaldean skies.

But in contrast with this tranquil idyll there is the turbulent and fantastic story of Joseph, a romance and adventure which is reminiscent, in its coloring, irony and unexpectedness, of the Arabian Nights. A young lad, the favorite of his father, dreams of a future greatness which sets him above his brothers. His dreams of personal aggrandizement are linked up, by decree from heaven, with the later salvation of all his people. The story is represented from beginning to end: the sale of Joseph to the merchants who bring him, a slave, into Egypt; the brilliant career of Joseph in the swarming, dazzling metropolis of the Egyptian Empire; the famine in Canaan; the visit of the brothers to Egypt in search of bread; their confrontation with Joseph; their reconciliation; the meeting between the old and broken Jacob with the son he had given up for dead. With every one of these incidents mingle the passionate utterances of the watchers in the synagogue. To them, as to the audience, this providential rescue of the sons of Jacob by a devious path which only God foresaw has a special meaning. Perhaps for them, too, some such unforeseen and unforeseeable provision has been made. The Thirteen-year-old Boy, the son of the Estranged One, cries out: "I am Joseph!" For he is returning to his people after long alienation in his childhood. The Rabbi exhorts the congregation to draw in the spirit of the drama, to learn forgiveness from Joseph, endurance from Jacob. Others in the synagogue react, each in his way. The Skeptic mocks; the Timid Soul trembles and does not believe.

Part II

From here on unfolds the story of the Deliverance of Israel—the Exodus from Egypt which has become the universal story and eternal symbol of freedom in its battle with tyranny and slavery. Mass effects are used here both for the portrayal of the enslavement of the children of Israel under the yoke of Egyptian bondage and the final liberation. The rhythm of laboring thousands under the hot, semi-tropical sun, the massive, overwhelming background of Egyptian national power, and later, the breaking of the bonds and the streaming of a people toward liberty—these form the themes on the upper levels of the stages, while, below, the congregation follows with breathless absorption, with excla-



Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son, Isaac.



Joseph is sold into slavery.



Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster.



Samuel Goldenberg as Moses.



The Alien Girl (Eliebe Lynn) and Jesse (Herbert Rudley) in the synagogue.



Boaz (Ralph Jameson) and Ruth (Katherine Carrington).

mations of fear and exultation the development of a situation the darkest part of which bears so close a resemblance to their own condition.

The interplay between the watchers in the synagogue and the protagonists of the Biblical drama becomes more detailed and more intricate at this point. Enraged by the perpetual cynicisms of the Skeptic in their midst, the community throws him out into the darkness. Suddenly he reappears—not in the Synagogue, but in the Biblical scenes. He reappears there because he is not simply an individual, but an eternal type. He exists in all ages, known under various names, Satan, Mephistopheles, Mockers, whose nature it is to sneer, to spread discouragement. It is he who incites the people to throw over their God while Moses communes with Him on the mountaintop. It is he who denies and mocks the prophets, he who leads the attack against Jeremiah, he who appeals to the basest instincts of the people when the country is threatened with destruction.

The Liberation from Egypt is a scene immense in conception and execution, thrilling in its implications. It is played out among the Israelites on the upper stages, but its echoes reverberate continuously through the Synagogue below and through the audience, which is waiting in suspense to know what will happen with the congregation when the vigil of the night is over.

A scene of extraordinary pathos and dramatic beauty is the death of Moses. The great leader, weighted down with the years of responsibility and labor, forbidden to enter the Promised Land, compelled to be satisfied with a glimpse of it from afar, finds that the hour of his death has come.

Part III

The third episode deals with the time of the Jewish Kingdom in Palestine, with the deeds of the three greatest Kings—Saul, David and Solomon—and with the struggle of Israel with the enemies from without and corrupting forces within.

Once again the interplay between the Synagogue and the Children of Israel heightens and sharpens the effects. Out of the darkness of the night two figures enter to seek the dangerous shelter of the synagogue. One of them is a Jew, the other is a daughter of the very people which is bent upon the destruction of these Jews. She has pledged eternal fidelity to her Jewish husband and to his people. On the threshold of the Synagogue he pleads with her to seek the security of her own Gentile world. But she clings to him, as Ruth of old clung to Naomi, refusing to abandon her in her wretchedness. And when the Synagogue is darkened and on the stage above we see the fields of Moab, and Naomi, the old, the unhappy, pleading with her young and widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, to go back to her people and her gods, we perceive (as the watchers in the Synagogue perceive) a new immediacy and poignancy in those unforgettable words which are the answer of Ruth: "Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; the people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

The pastoral of Ruth, with its modern significance for the watchers in the Synagogue and the audience in the theater, is balanced by the intense story of David, the shepherd boy, who comes forth as a savior when Israel is threatened with destruction. David the Giant-killer is again an eternal symbol. Just as every woman in the Synagogue understands the poignancy of the story of Ruth, so every youngster is fired with courage at the spectacle of the shepherd lad who comes out with his sling to face Goliath the Philistine. But from the moment when the Philistine is overthrown by the boy David, the drama takes a new and fantastic turn. The tragedy of Saul, whose honesty and sickness of soul have made him such a fascinating figure, unrolls: his perpetual warfare with the Philistines; his love of David and his jealousy of him, his despair, his visit to the witch of Endor, who raises Samuel for him from the dead, and then his death, together with his sons, on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, in a last desperate battle with the enemies of his people—these build up the first movements in the third episode.

Between the death of Saul and the climax of the third episode, which is the founding of the Temple by Solomon, there is (individual incidents always alternating with mass effects) the fascinating incident of the sin of David. The lad who had become King, and from whom the Messiah is to be descended, David the anointed, falls from grace. Love of Bathsheba led him to an act of basest treachery against her husband, Uriah the Hittite, a faithful soldier in the Jewish Army. For this sin punishment was swift and inescapable. The child of his sin dies: and the privilege of building the Temple in Jerusalem is withdrawn from David and conferred upon his son Solomon.

The climax of the third episode is the colorful celebration in the Temple. A massing of lights and music, a grouping of countless figures, a rhythmic ceremony which fills simultaneously all three middle stages turns this scene into one of the most imposing in the entire drama. Rightly so, since for the watchers in the Synagogue—and for the audience in the theater—this is the climax of the achievement of the Jews: toward this point in their history longing always turns back, and the dreams of restoration which have sustained the people for two thousand years are filled with the glory which shone upon the Temple of Solomon.

Part IV

The fourth episode is at once the darkest and most radiant in the drama. Its theme is the corruption of the Jews, their inner failure, and their defeat, their external failure. It is a theme of decay, rebellion from high principles, contempt for the law of God. And yet the theme ends on a high note of inspiration and hope.

The city of Jerusalem has fallen from the high estate which belonged to it in the days of the early Kings. Hideous and revolting idols, worshiped with loathsome ceremonies and grotesque obscene ritual, have tempted the people from the service of God. The Eternal Skeptic sits in the streets and openly sells his images. In vain the prophets foretell punishment and doom. False prophets, the darlings of the people, overbear the true prophets.

A weak King sits on the throne of David and Solomon. He has not the warrior gifts of David, nor the wisdom of Solomon. He has not the strength of character to seek peace with all his heart, humbling his own person before a stranger in order that his people might be saved.

The people can too easily be led into war. They are ready to listen to demagogues. And the King in his palace turns angrily from the warnings of Jeremiah, just as the people in the street spat upon him as a traitor in the pay of Babylon because he proposed peace and submission instead of war and defeat.

There is nothing but disaster in this episode: it seems to be the end of the people which has endured so long. The walls of Jerusalem are stormed, the temple is destroyed, the pledge of God to Abraham now seems to be withdrawn.

In this fourth episode, a parallel between the past and present—perfect in every detail—is achieved. An overpowering feeling that “it has all happened before” dominates the stages and the theater. The Jews wander out into exile from Jerusalem, driven by the power of the Tyrant. For just when Jerusalem is destroyed, word reaches the watchers in the Synagogue that there is no hope for them. They, their young and old, their sick and weak, must take up the staff of the wanderer.

An echo of redemption breaks into the vast double scene. Just as the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile, so they will be redeemed from this exile of the twentieth century.

The drama ends with the chorus of the one hundred and twenty-sixth Psalm:

*When the Lord returned to the Capital of Zion, we were as in a dream.
Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with song.*



Solomon raises his hands in thanksgiving.



Sam Jaffe as the Adversary.



The Thirteen-year-old Boy (Sidney Lumet) asks God, “Why?”



During the finale, the Congregation and Biblical characters embark on the “Road of Promise.”

Scholars Debate *Der Weg der Verheißung* in Chemnitz, 11-13 June 1999

by Ricarda Wackers

The Chemnitz premiere of the revived *Der Weg der Verheißung* was preceded by a scholarly symposium held at the city's Technische Universität, co-sponsored by the university's department of musicology and the Kurt Weill Foundation (represented by Helmut Loos and Guy Stern respectively). For two days, on 11 and 12 June 1999, scholars of music, literature, and theater presented papers and engaged in discussion on the topic: "Kurt Weill: Life and Works—with special regard to the biblical play *Der Weg der Verheißung*." As a part of the launch of the Kurt Weill centenary, the event was a success not least because of its superb organization.

The papers given on the first day dealt with a range of issues relating generally to Weill and his oeuvre. Most of the presentations considered aspects of Weill's life and career prior to his emigration. Friedbert Streller's examination of Weill's political and artistic orientation in the aftermath of November 1918 and his interest in Johannes R. Becher's work *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten: Der Aufbruch eines Volkes zu Gott* was followed by analytical observations on the correlation between words and music in selected German-language songs and stage works of Weill, emphasizing the importance of the respective underlying texts (Peter Andraschke and Hartmut Krones). Joachim Lucchesi illuminated Weill's relationship with Lotte Lenya and the various facets of this "life and art collective" through reference to their correspondence. The chorale "Wach auf, du verrotteter Christ" served Albrecht Riethmüller to illustrate that Weill—unlike Brecht—did not view the integration of traditional forms as an effect of ironic defamiliarization. Giselher Schubert criticized Theodor Adorno's assessment of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* as the first surrealist opera, demonstrating the inaccuracies of the position from the point of view of so-called "historical surrealism" and with reference to the composition itself. Only two presentations during the first day dealt with Weill after his departure from Germany. Horst Weber compared the personal and artistic experiences of Weill and Arnold Schoenberg during the period when each lived in the United States. Nils Grosch contributed a paper on *One Touch of Venus*, in which he argued that Weill had realized his own concept of musical dramaturgy in the context of the special challenges of the musical comedy genre.

The second day of the symposium was devoted to topics more directly concerning *Der Weg der Verheißung*. The question of the work's genre emerged time and again as a central point of contention, eliciting discussion and debate that continued beyond the four walls of the meeting room. The work was identified as an "opera" in the press, but the conference participants were not satisfied with such an unequivocal identification. The reasons for the uncertainty of genre were seen to lie partly in the fact that epic and dramatic elements nearly balance each other. Helmut Loos's paper called upon sacred opera and scenic oratorio as possible models for comparison. Edward Harsh, on the other hand, in his remarks on selected compositional aspects of the work, suggested a connection with popular song forms. The most provocative and intensely discussed hypothesis proved to be the label of "pageant" advanced by Christian Kuhnt and Atay Citron. The term was seen as potentially more than a genre designation. According to Kuhnt, the term "pageant" should be considered because one of the primary aims of the work is to move the audience, and he sees this trait as a defining

generic quality. Once the participants saw the work on stage, many agreed that Kuhnt's approach to characterizing *Der Weg* might offer more options for interpretation than a conventional genre definition: the work cannot meet the criteria generally applied to "pure" opera.

Leonard M. Fiedler convincingly put forth the proposition that Weill had needed to subordinate his music to the demands of a propaganda play that was, above all, a Reinhardt production. Two additional papers broadened the scope of the discussion: a lively speculation by David Drew as to who other than Weill might have been chosen by Reinhardt to compose the music for *Der Weg*, and a presentation by Jürgen Schebera considering the role of Weill's and Ben Hecht's pageant *We Will Never Die* in informing the American public about the persecution and mass murder of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The conference ended with a panel discussion on 13 June in the lobby of the Chemnitz opera house. This was a public event attended by the scholars as well as by members of the cast, the press, and other interested people. Many of the issues discussed in the previous two days of the conference were presented here to a larger audience. Again, the work's genre proved to be a principal focus of discussion. Additionally, there was some discussion of the treatment of the work's ending and of the editing involved in developing a performing version.

These three days in Chemnitz began an important debate concerning a work that has received too little attention and recognition—like many others stemming from Weill's post-German career—as one of the developmental and experimental stages in the composer's output. The ideas, facts, and even historical documents that emerged from the conference will inspire future research. The proceedings will be published in the coming months.

Call for Papers

Emigration and Exile from Central and Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century, University of Toronto

The Association of Slavic Graduate Students in conjunction with the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Toronto is currently accepting proposals for a three-day Conference on Emigration and Exile from Central and Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century, to be held in February 2000. Abstracts of 1 page or less should be sent to the following address: emigre30@hotmail.com before November 1, 1999.

This interdisciplinary conference will focus on formulating, interpreting, and debating the concepts of emigration and exile in the light of theorizing the notions of wandering and homelessness, the desire and need for rootedness. The issues of emigration and exile during and after the pressures of Russian and Soviet colonialism will be dealt with extensively over the three days of the conference.

Opera Analysis, Trinity College, Cambridge

Abstracts are invited for papers considering all aspects of opera analysis, for a two-day conference to be held at Trinity College, Cambridge on 10-11 April 2000. The conference hopes to provide a platform for the exploration of a variety of analytical approaches to opera, and a re-evaluation of the contribution that can be made in this field in the light of the recent proliferation of socially and historically contextual studies of this 400-year-old genre.

Papers should be 25-30 minutes long; please send abstracts (150 words) of proposals and details of audio-visual requirements by 1 January 2000 to: Joanna Harris, Trinity College, Cambridge CB2 1TQ, United Kingdom.

Letters

The following letter was shared with the Kurt Weill Foundation by the author.

To: Harold E. Morse, The Ovation Network

Please accept my own personal ovation to the Ovation Network for its 16 June telecast of a live performance taped at the 1998 Salzburg Festival of Kurt Weill's and Bertolt Brecht's opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*).

However, I was quite befuddled when I realized that the important "Brothel Scene" had been edited out of the program (the edit on the broadcast was quite abrupt, and would appear that the scene was most likely snipped out by Ovation, and not the supplier of the master tape).

Although I was not in Salzburg for this production, I read about it extensively and can't imagine that, given the amount of nudity shown in the rest of the production and the use of words considered "profanity" by the FCC in the subtitles (e.g. "shit"), there could have been anything in this scene that would have been offensive to your viewers.

I doubt the scene was cut to make the program fit a specific time frame. It lasts only about six minutes, and your telecast came in a bit under two hours and forty-five minutes. The next fifteen minutes were devoted to one of the many "short programs" run by Ovation to fill out time until the next hour comes. In this case, it was a pretty, young soprano singing a Baroque aria in a black-and-white conceptual video set in a garbage dump.

So I am left puzzled as to why the "Brothel Scene" was censored from your telecast. It certainly made for some strange continuity as it is the second episode of four devoted to various "pastimes" in the City of Mahagonny (the first is eating, followed by love, boxing, and drinking). After the "Eating Scene," viewers were suddenly thrown into a duet that flows out of the context of the "Brothel Scene" and then immediately into the bout in the ring. This is despite references that are constantly repeated in the text to the series of the four activities. Even when the hallowed Metropolitan Opera telecast this opera in English on PBS circa 1980, the recurring lines sung by the chorus were (as best as memory serves), "First on the list is fill your belly, next on the list is getting laid; Then see the boxer beat to jelly. . ." and the "Brothel Scene" was presented intact. Anyone seeing this opera for the first time in Ovation's presentation must have been a bit perplexed at the gap in the plot.

If Ovation's censors found it absolutely necessary to delete the "Brothel Scene," wouldn't it have been beneficial to Ovation's integrity and viewers' knowledge if Ovation had prefaced the telecast with a screen stating that the program had been edited for content?

Larry L. Lash
New York
24 June 1999

Ovation's reply to Mr. Lash cited "airing nudity during primetime hours" as its reason for the unacknowledged editing and conceded that "in the future, it [would be] a good idea to mention that the program was edited for television." Having received no prior notification of any problem or proposed editing of the film from either the producer, RM Associates, or the U.S. cable channel, European American Music Corp. protested to both firms and pointed out that such unauthorized internal

cuts in the video production had been specifically prohibited in the license agreement. After a brief exchange of legal opinions on the matter, Ovation canceled its next scheduled telecast of the film.—ed.]

To the editor:

Having read your moving remembrances of Lotte Lenya in the last issue, I also read your review of the Weill entries in the *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, volume 6. Let me state at the outset that I am not part of the editorial or publishing team; I am merely one of the authors (and contributed the article on *Der Kuhhandel* in volume 6). I advocated including as many Weill articles as possible, but one has to understand that certain limits were necessary. The editors found it next to impossible to present in one 818-page volume all of the stage works written by composers ranging from Spontini to Zumsteeg, including Strauss (10 pages), Strauß (39), Strauss (54), Stravinsky (24), Sullivan (23), Tchaikowsky (24), Verdi (113), Wagner (83), Weber (23), and Weill (39), as well as those by composers not so prolific. Therefore, my own contribution for *Love Life* has been moved to a supplementary volume, and, as far as I know, the same has happened to the one on *Die Bürgschaft*. I advised the editors to omit entries for *Happy End* and *Marie galante*, because these works are really plays with music. Your readers should also know that the entry for *Die sieben Tödsunden* can be found in volume 1, under the entry for choreographer George Balanchine.

Josef Heinzelmann
Mainz
8 November 1998

To the editor:

Although I have been consistently impressed by your superb reporting of Weill-Lenya-related goings-on, I must take exception to your disappointing coverage (or lack thereof) of the Weill performances and recordings of Marianne Faithfull. I own most of your newsletters of the last 4 years and have been puzzled by your seeming lack of interest in her work. Though I am sure you are already aware of this, I must point out that Ms. Faithfull won great critical acclaim for her nightclub revue "20th Century Blues" and for her portrayal of Jenny in the 1992 [Dublin] Gate Theatre production of *The Threepenny Opera*. While I've not had the privilege of seeing Ms. Faithfull perform live, I find her Weill releases of recent years to be more than adequate evidence of her versatility and interpretive genius. And most impressive is her 1998 recording of *The Seven Deadly Sins* with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra. As Anna I, Ms. Faithfull delivers an electrifying vocal tour de force, making it an essential listening experience for anyone who is a lover of Weill's music. Why did your publication all but completely ignore this?

I, like most, consider Lenya to be the definitive Weill interpreter—but I am also quick to recognize excellence in other performers. Marianne Faithfull deserves credit for doing justice to Weill's music in her unique style, with a voice that is witty, tough, seductive, heartbreaking, and, very definitely, her own.

T. S. Greene
Seattle, Washington
19 March 1999

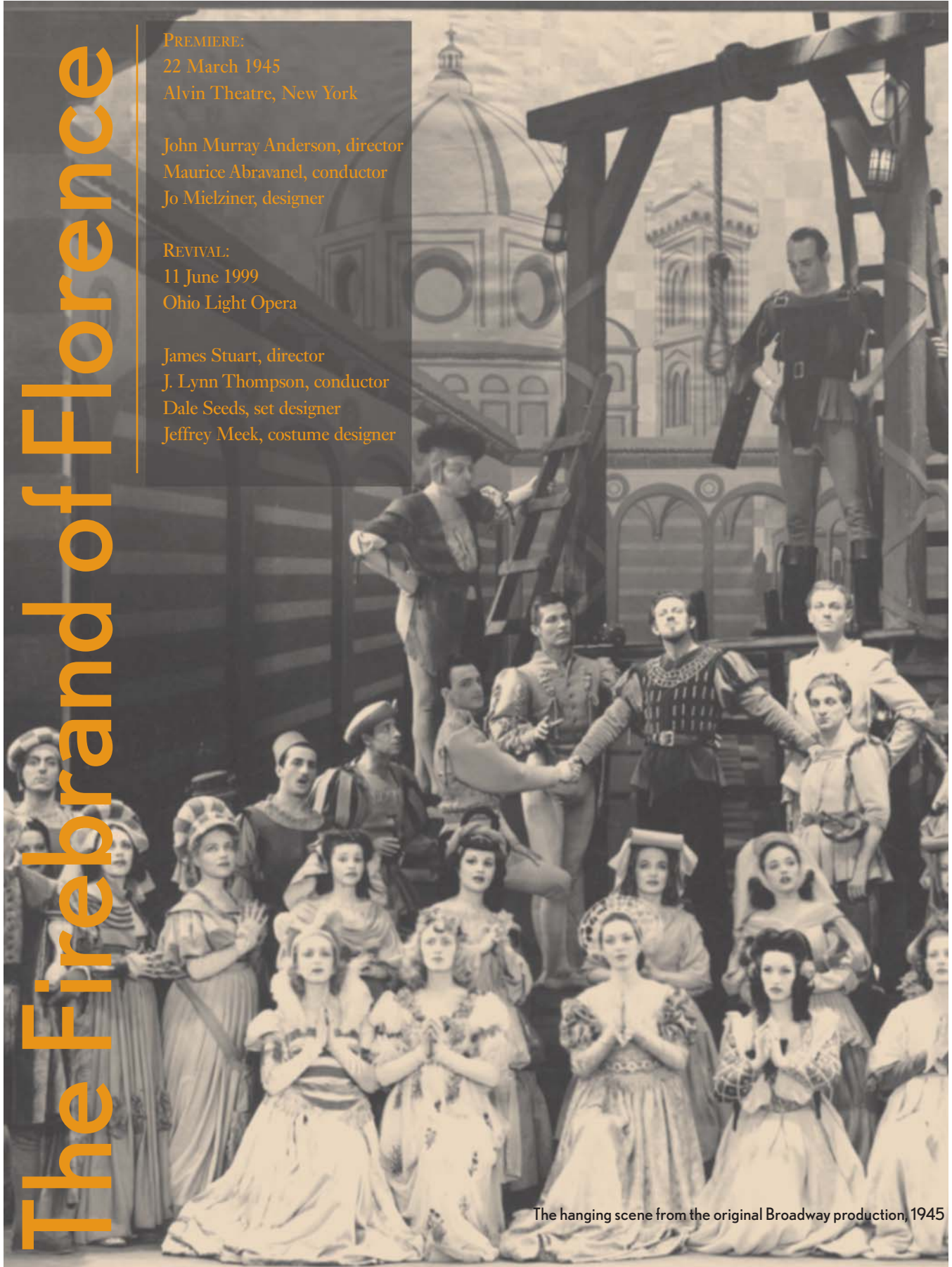
The Firebrand of Florence

PREMIERE:
22 March 1945
Alvin Theatre, New York

John Murray Anderson, director
Maurice Abravanel, conductor
Jo Mielziner, designer

REVIVAL:
11 June 1999
Ohio Light Opera

James Stuart, director
J. Lynn Thompson, conductor
Dale Seeds, set designer
Jeffrey Meek, costume designer



The hanging scene from the original Broadway production, 1945

Operetta as Revenant: *The Firebrand of Florence*

by Joel Galand

*L'opérette est une fille de l'opéra-comique—une fille qui a mal tournée. Mais les filles qui tournent mal ne sont pas toujours sans agrément.**

—Camille Saint-Saëns

Saint-Saëns's *bon mot* is not inapposite to the career of Kurt Weill, who returned now and again to operetta as one would to a disdainful mistress who demands much but bestows only humiliation. His two works most straightforwardly in the genre, *Der Kuhhandel* and *The Firebrand of Florence*, were staggeringly unsuccessful. The latter was such an expensive show that producer Max Gordon, not wanting to throw good money after bad, withdrew it after only forty-three performances. Only two shellac sides were recorded; until recently, it has remained one of Weill's most obscure works, available only as archival material.

The quick demise of *The Firebrand of Florence* stemmed partly from weaknesses specific to the production, partly from structural flaws in the work, and partly from critical consternation over what appeared to be a slightly quirky, but otherwise old-fashioned, operetta. One expected something more up-to-date from a composer and lyricist whose previous collaboration had produced *Lady in the Dark*. Edwin Justus Mayer's adaptation of his 1924 stage hit *The Firebrand*, itself loosely derived from Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, must have seemed a throwback to such swashbuckling operettas as Rudolf Friml's *The Vagabond King*.



The authors of *The Firebrand of Florence*, Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, and Edwin Justus Mayer, with choreographer Catherine Littlefield.

Weill knew the operetta repertoire well. To make ends meet, he had once conducted an operetta season in a provincial theater, and he reviewed operettas frequently in his capacity as a radio critic. He agreed with the verdict of his contemporaries, Karl Kraus and Theodor Adorno, that the genre had degenerated since the days of Offenbach, whose inspired nonsense had presented unwary audi-

ences a glimpse of their own follies. In Weimar Berlin, the genre tended on the one hand towards realistic, "tragic" operettas that aped opera while shedding all satirical intent; on the other, it tended towards the revue. Weill clearly preferred the mordant Gallic *opéra bouffé* to the sentimentalized *Mitteleuropa* version. Of Strauss's *Waldmeister* he writes:

It says scarcely anything to us anymore, contentwise; it is based on moral concepts of the [18]80s and strikes us as naive and childish. And yet no sooner have the first tones of the overture sounded than we are put under a spell. Something reverberates in this music that springs from the realm of the highest art, from something humane.

On the other hand, he praises not only the music of *Orphée aux enfers* but also its continued social relevance:

Offenbach's satire is interpretable in various ways. It need not be confined to its times; it could easily be applied to certain laughable things in our own day.

Elsewhere, he suggests a didactic use for operettas: the best ones blend "humor, drama, sentiment, words, dance, and music" in an intelligent manner that can appeal to the masses. For years, however, there have been no good operettas because of competition from film and because all traces of originality have disappeared in favor of the "purely superficial visual feast [*rein äusserliche Schaugepränge*] of the revue." It should be radio's role to revive operetta classics. Such performances would limit the proliferation of kitsch by "releasing the spirits of light and sentimental music," thus making room for more serious work.

Weill's first genuine operetta, *Der Kuhhandel* (1934–35), is also his most Offenbachian work. In the act-one waltz finale, "*die ganze haute volée*" of Santa Maria gathers at the presidential palace, gossiping and singing the praises of the *Veuve Clicquot*, heedless of the brewing political storm. When the waltz is interrupted by a *coup d'état*, the guests, without so much as a collective blink, close the act singing, "*Die starke Hand hat Gott gesandt! Gerettet ist das Vaterland!*" Dahlhaus's description of the second-act finale from *La belle Hélène* could just as easily apply here:

Offenbach's inversion of sentiment, with the music proceeding in disregard of the text, symbolizes a tacit acquiescence among swindlers and swindled alike—and here the two are indistinguishable. Namely, all consent to the corruption which holds them in thrall and which they collectively repress by fleeing into the euphoria of the waltz.

But the differences between *Kuhhandel* and the *opéras bouffés* are no less significant. The latter are imbued throughout with a sense of unreality, irreverence, and an insouciance that persists despite general corruption. Hints of a prelapsarian arcadia are rare, John Styx's song in *Orphée* being an exceptional moment. In contrast, the agrarian life of Santa Maria, with its quaint betrothal customs, represents an idyll that is threatened by industrial developments. The peasant couple is forced by financial exigencies into the city, he as a factory worker, she as a prostitute. The operetta's happy ending does not restore

* The word "fille" can be translated as "daughter" or, as in this context, "loose woman." A rough translation of the epigraph is "Operetta is a daughter of opera comique—a daughter who did not turn out well. But daughters who do not turn out well are not without agreeable pleasures."

the original ambience. The lovers have been altered by their projection into economic history, much as their counterparts in Weill's later *Love Life*.

From the start, *The Firebrand of Florence* was planned as a period piece. In October 1942, Weill, Gershwin, and Mayer nearly contracted for an operetta for Grace Moore based on the life of Nell Gwyn. At this point Weill still conceived of operetta as a medium for political commentary; a surviving page of notes shows that he entertained the thought of making the Nell Gwyn story a satire on imperialism. Mayer's screenwriting commitments at MGM, however, precluded a collaboration at that time. Weill turned instead to the completely apolitical *One Touch of Venus*, which did not turn out like the "opéra-comique on the Offenbach line" he had envisioned when approaching Gershwin about the possibility of writing its lyrics.

Once *Venus* had settled into its run of 567 performances, the triumvirate regrouped. It seemed like a propitious time for operetta. Korngold's adaptation of *Die Fledermaus* (*Rosalinda*) was one of the great successes of the 1942-43 season, with 521 performances. The following season witnessed a similar revival of *The Merry Widow*. Even the triumph of *Oklahoma!* could be interpreted as evidence of a renewed interest in operetta, albeit of a realistic type Kraus would have decried. The decision to base a new operetta on Mayer's 1924 play seems to have come initially not from Mayer himself, but from Isabel Leighton, the librettist for a previous musical version, *The Dagger and the Rose*, that had closed in 1928 after a one-week tryout in Atlantic City. Early in 1944, Leighton contacted Weill about composing the music for a new adaptation. Weill reported to Gershwin that, "I was very unenthusiastic, but they finally asked if I would be interested in case that you would do the lyrics—and I said yes." For his part, Gershwin worried that he had no experience writing lyrics for a historical subject: Where would he find room for humorous topical allusions?

Weill quickly changed his mind about Mayer's play. On April 3 he wrote Gershwin that he now considered it one of the "best-constructed" comedies he had ever read:

I was amazed to what degree it is a ready-made libretto for the kind of smart, intelligent, intimate romantic-satirical operetta for the international market which we were always talking about, and I think, from our point of view we would make a great mistake if we would not seriously consider it. I see it as a small show (with great touring possibilities), more a comic opera than a musical comedy, which means it would have a great deal of music of all types: songs, duets, quartets and sextets, recitative, underscored dialogue, and some dancing.

In the same letter, we discover that Leighton is out of the picture; Mayer himself would adapt his play, and Weill would approach Max Gordon about producing it. By mid-May, Gordon was planning a Boston tryout around Thanksgiving and a New York opening Christmas week. Hassard Short, who had co-directed *Lady in the Dark*, was slated to join the production team in the fall. Because of Mayer's film commitments and Gershwin's aversion to spending a hot summer in New York far from his swimming pool and regular poker game, Weill agreed to work in Beverly Hills.

The principal reason for Weill's change of heart was surely that at last he had found in the Duchess of Florence a potential role for Lenya. Another factor might have been the possibility of composing an entire Broadway show along the lines of the Columbus sequence from *Where Do We Go From Here?*, a film for which he and Gershwin had just completed music and lyrics. This passage differs from the other songs in the film in that it is a through-composed scene, some ten minutes in length, in a flexible musical idiom that moves freely from Italianate recitative and arioso for "legitimate" voices to passages of musical comedy suitable for the star, Fred MacMurray. It is stylistically of a piece with *The Firebrand of Florence*.

The ten-month history of the *Firebrand* production, from Weill's first session with Gershwin and Mayer on 26 June to the 28 April closing, was a calamity. Weill's main concern was over the amount of work Mayer was going to have to do on the book. The concern proved prescient. Within two weeks, Weill was threatening to quit the show, informing Max Gordon that both of his collaborators were too lazy to work. Weill's projected summer sojourn in



The cast of *The Firebrand of Florence* was quite large and elaborately costumed. Lenya, playing the Duchess, is center front, with Melville Cooper as the Duke seated to her left. Cellini (Earl Wrightson) and Angela (Beverly Tyler) are over Lenya's right shoulder, on either side of the courtier kneeling beside her. Photo: Lucas-Pritchard.

California stretched to the end of October. By the 18th of that month, Weill and Gershwin were able to record piano-vocal selections through Act II, scene 2. The rest of Act II was worked out on separate coasts. The tryouts were postponed until late February.

Mayer did little actual work on the libretto; most of the dialogue is drawn verbatim from the 1924 play. The adaptation consists largely of reorderings and cuts. The only entirely new scenes are the first and last. The original play began *in medias res* with what is now Act I, scene 3, and it did not include the happy ending in France. The text of scene 1 consists entirely of Gershwin's lyrics. Elsewhere, Mayer added new dialogue making the Duke more buffoonish than in the original and creating a context for "A Rhyme for Angela." Apparently, neither Mayer nor Gershwin were of much help during the tryouts. George Kaufman was hired as book doctor, but the director, John Murray Anderson, correctly recalled that "the medicine proved to be more in the nature of a paregoric." Kaufman broadened the Duke's comic material still further.

Casting the four principals proved problematic. Small wonder that, as one critic tactfully put it, "one of Kurt Weill's finest scores . . . [was] not always projected as it should have been." All of Weill's top choices for Cellini were either engaged elsewhere or unacceptable to Gordon. The final choice, Earl Wrightson, had a pleasant baritone and almost no stage experience. Abravanel politely recalled his characterization as "cautious." Although Weill's preference for the Duke was Walter Slezak, who sang well and whose Viennese accent would have balanced Lenya's, Gordon saved one thousand dollars a week with British comedian Melville Cooper. The critics found Cooper's stage antics amusing but his vocal abilities inadequate. Susanna Forster and Kathryn Grayson were among those proposed for Angela, but the part went to Beverly Tyler, a Hollywood starlet who had played a minor role in *The Harvey Girls*. Anecdotal evidence that she was the protégée of one of the show's backers might explain this odd casting decision. Her limited technique included a tendency to sing flat, doubtless prompting some of the last-minute changes in the score: No. 15 was assigned to Emilia, and a large portion of No. 21c was cut. Weill did get his first choice for the Duchess, but this victory proved Pyrrhic. Lenya was not the amusing Latin hothead needed to play a man-eating Italian aristocrat. In the end, the critics wrote as little about Lenya as possible.

After Gordon decided to close the show, Weill complained that it was "killed by production," one that had cost six principal investors \$225,000 (compared with \$127,715 spent on mounting *Lady in the Dark* a few years earlier). That John Murray Anderson was hired to stage the show, after Hassard Short had demanded too much money and Moss Hart had declined, suggests that Gordon had in mind a grand song-and-dance extravaganza, different from the intimate operetta that Weill had envisioned. Anderson had been staging revues and spectacles since the early 1920s. On the strength of his success with Billy Rose's aquacades and his circus show *Jumbo*, the Ringling Brothers had entrusted him with seven of



Earl Wrightson as Cellini and Beverly Tyler as Angela in a publicity photo.

their editions. He had almost no experience directing book shows. When critics complained that

Firebrand was poorly paced, they may have been thinking of the large number of dances that interrupt the action. Not only are there several dance evolutions of vocal numbers, but there are also three ballet movements: a tarantella in the first-act finale, and a gigue and sarabande in the final scene. The last two numbers in particular, unlike the ballets in *One Touch of Venus*, contribute nothing to plot or characterization. As potpourris of earlier material, they add no new musical ideas—a serious miscalculation, considering their penultimate and antepenultimate positions in the score.

Weill's ambition to compose *The Firebrand of Florence* as a true comic opera, which is how he most often designated it, should be understood in connection with his vexation that so much of the credit for reinventing and revitalizing the Broadway musical was going to Richard Rodgers. He was justifiably proud of his *Firebrand*

score, the orchestral manuscript of which occupies about 650 pages, more than any of his works except *Love Life*. One number in particular stands out as unprecedented in a Broadway musical: the twenty-minute opening scene incorporates recitative and aria, choruses, and dances within a completely through-composed dramatization of Cellini's near-execution and pardon. Despite its external two-act design, the score fits the traditional Viennese operetta model: two long acts with extensive finales followed by a short third act as denouement. The first-act finale (No. 13) introduces the classic operetta *topos* of an altered state induced by drink and dance temporarily suspending the plot machinations and allowing—as if through the distorted reflection of a champagne glass—a utopic vision to emerge. Over half of the finale is set to a tarantella rhythm, introduced with the words "The nighttime is no time for thinking." Thus instructed, the entire ensemble loses itself in an orgiastic celebration of community. Dance serves a similar function in the trial scene: Cellini's negation of free will (No. 21b) sets the entire courtroom waltzing with abandon. Admittedly, both acts end with an excessive amount of reprise: the two *Kuhhandel* finales remain his most inventive essays at the extended operetta ensemble. Although at times *The Firebrand of Florence* nearly succeeds in creating the traditional operetta dream-like aura found in Offenbach, it never suspends reason in the service of social criticism. Despite these caveats, it remains a charming exercise in a traditional genre, the sentimental trappings of which are cleverly undercut by Gershwin's stylistically anachronistic lyrics.

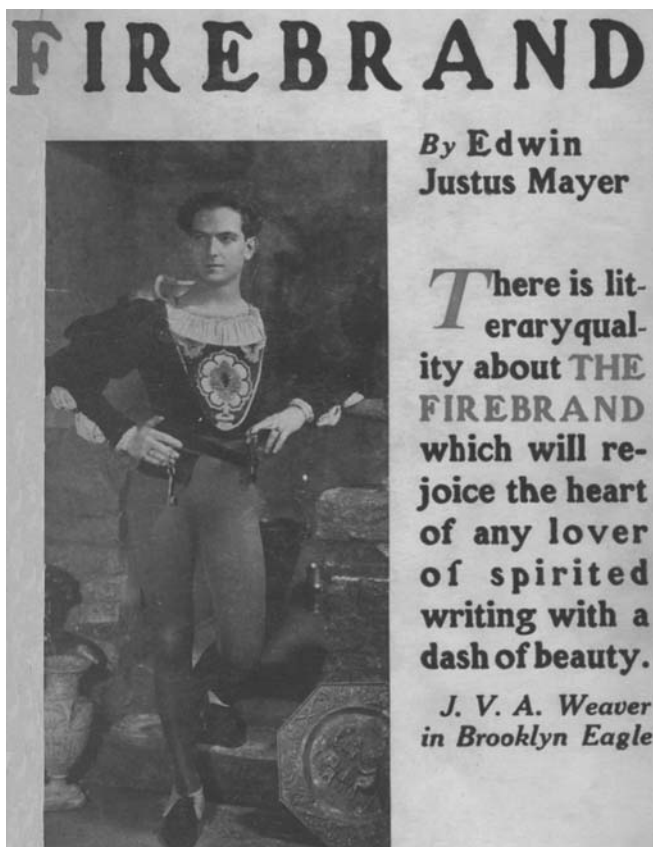
The principal obstacle that *The Firebrand of Florence* faces today is its book. In 1945 critics complained rightly that the adaptation pales in contrast to the original play. Although Mayer added little, the fault lies in what he took out. The 1924 version satirically punctures not only the sentimental conventions of period swashbucklers but also the Romantic concept of artistic genius. Cellini is a braggart given to uttering lines like, "Through that statue, I enter the Holy Ghost before I die." In twenty-four hours he kills not only Maffio but three other men. It is not only the conflict between love and work that tears the lovers apart. Once Cellini has possessed

her, Angela no longer represents for him an Idea, and for him a love affair is primarily an aesthetic event: "I stole her! And what have I found? That what was rich and mystical under the stars was gross and common in the light of day." After his final pardon, he callously gives her to the Duke. As the play ends, Cellini holds the Duchess's key in his hand, contemplating the prospect of a new conquest. The libretto endeavors to make Cellini a more conventional romantic lead, akin to Lehár's Goethe, tragically yielding to the imperatives of his art.

In the original version Angela was no mere model but a prostitute as well. Her mother, Beatrice, sells her favors, haggling with Cellini over their price. Angela has become a cynic: "I've tried to fall in love with all the men I've known. With the master . . . with the Duke. And if they are good-looking, they are all the same to me." In the end, a *soupçon* of sentiment over Cellini notwithstanding, she becomes the Duke's mistress ("It isn't as if I didn't like him") on condition that he exile her mother. The Duke, for his part, is no elderly twit but rather a thirty-five-year-old tyrant, somewhat comically dim-witted, but dangerously cruel.

Weill was capable of entering the spirit of Mayer's original play. After all, he had set to music many a cynical love affair in his younger days. Was it a cautious attitude towards the Broadway public that induced him to adopt the following stance?

Everybody here agrees that there is quite a lot of work to be done on the book. The most important job is to make the love story more sincere and less cynical without losing the sharp, Shavian humor of the original play. That will take a lot of careful planning and probably a great deal of actual rewriting on the part of Eddie.



The jacket of Mayer's original play, published by Boni and Liveright in 1924, featured a photo of Joseph Schildkraut as Cellini.

As late as November, the collaborators had still not decided on a suitable resolution to the plot. Writing to Gershwin, Weill suggests that the lyrics from the "Zodiac Song" ("No Matter Under What Star You're Born"), cut from *The Lady in the Dark*, be salvaged and used to expand the trial music into the *scène complexe* that now comprises Nos. 21a-c. Moreover, Weill wants this material to form only the first portion of a through-composed finale on the order of the opening scene:

The whole trial scene right up to Cellini's departure for Paris should be another complete musical-lyrical conception, a complete equivalent (in form) to our opening scene. . . . Ascanio's entrance as a soldier could have music. . . . Then we play the comedy scene ending with Ottaviano's being taken away ("The World is Full of Villains" [reprise]). . . . Angela, singing, tells Cellini that now they will at last live together. The Marquis, singing, tells him about the job that's waiting for him. Cellini is torn apart and it would all lead to the big ensemble you always had in mind for this spot. Eddie, I think, has a good idea for that number. It is a quotation from Byron's *Don Juan*:

*Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence.*

The finale would end with Angela alone and brokenhearted.

Weill's suggestions were only partly followed. The scene was lyricized and set to music just through Angela's entrance, and, even then, her aria "How Wonderfully Fortunate" was radically shortened in the orchestral version. The rest of the scene is spoken, except for the magnificent duet "Love is My Enemy" and a partial reprise of "The Little Naked Boy." From the musical standpoint, one might regret that Weill's plans for the second-act finale were only partially realized—and even then, not completely orchestrated—and that the appended Fontainebleau scene is little more than a revue in period costume. From the literary standpoint, to be sure, a "tragic" second act finale in the manner of Lehár's *Der Zarewitsch* would have clashed just as much with Mayer's original vision as does the happy denouement in the manner of *Der Zigeunerbaron*. In hindsight, the best solution would have been a second-act finale that included the existing music but then continued with a musicalization of the 1924 ending. In that guise, *The Firebrand of Florence* might well have failed in 1945 anyway, since the idiosyncratic manner in which it mocks its own romantic pretensions would have contrasted even more sharply with the kitsch-sincerity of that season's successful costume operettas (*Song of Norway*, *Up in Central Park*, *Carousel*). But at least the tone of Weill's last operetta would have been consistent, both with what the collaborators managed to preserve of the play's satirical thrust, and with the conception of the genre to which the composer had once subscribed. In 1935 a traumatized Karl Kraus asserted that after Hitler, Offenbach was no longer possible. Satire depends on language; it falls silent when faced with the unspeakable. The trajectory from *Der Kuhhandel*, through the aborted *Nell Gwynn*, to *The Firebrand of Florence* speaks to the evisceration of operetta.

Joel Galand is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Rochester and Assistant Professor of Theory at the Eastman School of Music. He is editing *The Firebrand of Florence* for the Kurt Weill Edition.

The Firebrand of Florence at Ohio Light Opera

PREMIERE: 11 June 1999

by James Lovensheimer

For its twenty-first season, the Ohio Light Opera, resident professional company at the College of Wooster in northern Ohio, decided to give its audience in general—and Kurt Weill enthusiasts in particular—a rare treat: a new production of *The Firebrand of Florence*, the Broadway operetta with music by Weill, lyrics by Ira Gershwin, and a book by Edwin Justus Mayer based on his 1924 Broadway hit, *The Firebrand*, about events in the life of Benvenuto Cellini. Because the work had been unproduced since its disastrous 1945 Broadway run of only forty-three performances, materials such as scores, scripts, and orchestra parts had to be gathered and edited for use in this production. To this end, the Kurt Weill Foundation provided a generous grant. The actual program credit for “materials restored and edited from the originals,” however, goes to Joel Galand, noting further that this restoration and editing was “in preparation for the critical edition [of the work] . . .” Credit for adaptation, consisting largely of a cut in the second act to be discussed below, is given to director James Stuart. After such careful preparation, the OLO production, despite a few problems, makes a good argument for *Firebrand’s* stageworthiness. In fact, some of the problems with this production, not all of them inherent in the piece, are oddly reminiscent of problems that were pointed out in many of the original 1945 reviews.

Weill retained confidence in his score, even when the show failed miserably. Soon after it closed, the composer wrote to his parents, “Musically it was the best thing I’ve written in years, a real opera, with big choruses and ensemble numbers, full of melodic invention, utilizing all the knowledge of my trade that I’ve accumulated through the years.” The opening scene suggests that Weill was assessing his own work fairly. An extended *scena* that,



Daniel Neer as Benvenuto Cellini awaits hanging as the chorus of models mourns. Photo: Matt Dilyard.

with the orchestral prelude, lasts approximately twenty minutes, this is among his most sophisticated musical sequences for the commercial stage. It indeed suggests Weill’s term “Broadway opera.” Following *Lady in the Dark* by only a few years, *Firebrand* has

ensembles that exploit compositional techniques found in the earlier show's dream sequences, what Ronald Sanders calls "a continuous and thoroughly developed composition based on original popular-style themes." It is the ensemble and finale writing, in fact, that provides *Firebrand's* score with its most distinguished moments. The Act I, scene 2, Finaletto ("I Am Happy Here") is another example of beautiful ensemble writing. A quintet with chorus, it is both technically accomplished and accessible, and the part writing is especially transparent. Both of these ensembles anticipate Bernstein's work in *Candide*, as does other music in the score. An early duet ("You're Far Too Near Me") for Cellini and his beloved, Angela, is a Lehar-esque waltz that is written without the sense of parody that will come several years later, when Cole Porter uses the genre for his tongue-in-cheek "Wunderbar." This waltz, however, is as straightforward and simple as it is lovely. In the second act, "Oh, It Pays to Have a Witness" and "The Trial Scene" maintain the high standards set in the first act ensemble numbers.

Not all the numbers are so successful, however. A song intended as a comic moment for the Duke and Angela, "A Nozy Cook," is

musically banal at best. Worse, the lyrics are extremely weak, reaching for but never achieving cleverness. (Gershwin resorts to rhymes such as "Florence" and "death warrants," for instance.) Any hope for the number was diminished further by the mediocre performance of Boyd Mackus as the Duke, by far the weakest contribution to the evening. "A Rhyme for Angela," another comic possibility, was at least musically interesting, but it, too, was compromised by Gershwin's (and Mackus's) generally sub-standard contributions. It should be noted, of course, that Weill purposely composed two different kinds of music for the show. As he wrote to Lenya, "The operatic music will be limited to Cellini and Angela. The Duke and Duchess will be written in comedy style." While some of the music for the Duchess is good—he was writing for Lenya, after all!—his comedic writing takes second place to his operatic writing, at least in this instance.

Weill said from the beginning that he thought of the work "more as a light opera than a musical comedy," and he composed accordingly. "Since amplification has become universal in Broadway theaters," noted Joseph Smith in an article on *Firebrand* in the Spring 1986 issue of this newsletter, "show singing has changed so much that the commercial theater has become a poor custodian of its own musical classics." A company whose bread and butter is operetta, however, is equipped to mount such productions using the unamplified vocal power they require, and this particular endeavor demonstrates the more than adequate abilities of the Ohio Light Opera to serve the musical needs of such works. Under the excellent musical direction of J. Lynn Thompson, the vocal performances by the mostly student chorus are of a uniformly high quality. The ensemble singing is exceptionally strong, complementing a full and often exciting sound with nearly flawless diction.

The singing of the principals is also excellent, although Daniel Neer, in the title role, has a strained production that makes him difficult to watch. While the sound he produces is rich and robust, his achievement of it involves facial contortions suggestive of a flawed technique that, in time, may cost him some of his power and control. As the spunky ingenue Angela, Julie Wright has a more assured vocal technique that produces a frequently ravishing sound over a wide range, although she has more difficulty with diction than the other members of the company. Elaine Fox supplies the role of the Duchess with an impressive mezzo voice, making one wonder, albeit briefly, what this role must have sounded like in the throat of Lenya, who received uniformly bad, if mostly polite, reviews ("mis-cast" was the adjective common to most of them). Other outstanding vocal performances include those of Gerald Aben, David Babinet, and Christopher Swanson. Especially notable was Megan Loomis in the small supporting role of Emilia, and her performance suggests capabilities far beyond the meager demands of this role.

Dramatically, the problems are far more pronounced, and, in more than one instance, recall the original reviews mentioned above. Weill had originally hoped for Alfred Drake or, perhaps, Ezio Pinza for the role of Cellini, but he had to settle for the young Earl Wrightson, a charming baritone lacking the bravado called for by the title character. Wrightson's lack of experience and stage presence were noted in most reviews. Daniel Neer has a similar problem.



Julie Wright, as Angela, leads the chorus. Photo: Matt Dilyard.

While likable, he barely pays lip service to the suave braggadocio so necessary for Cellini's character to work, and he is not helped by a physical appearance that suggests a butcher from Cleveland more than a dashing Florentine firebrand. Julie Wright has the unenviable task of playing a female character burdened with sexist conceptions of the 1940s, but she makes it work through an honest and unaffected reading of the role. Her final moments, which are the final moments of this version of the show, are truly moving. While Elaine Fox brings a lovely voice to the part of the Duchess, she lacks any regal or comedic stage presence that would turn lovely singing into fleshed-out character. In other production areas, the show is cleanly if unimaginatively staged and lit, brightly costumed, and well choreographed, although choreographer Carol Hageman occasionally asks for too much from several male members of the ensemble who seem to have been hired more for their high notes than their high leaps.

The ending of the show here is different from that of the original version, which, in turn, is different from Mayer's original play. The Broadway musical had Cellini leaving Angela in Florence and going off to Paris. Due largely to time factors, according to conductor Thompson, director James Stuart excised the Paris scene. Cellini says good-bye to Angela after the duet "Love Is My Enemy" and departs for Paris, leaving Angela alone on stage to sing a reprise and bring down the final curtain. This creates a melancholy ending,

to be sure, although it is one that leaves Angela with some dignity—at least as played by Ms. Wright. But if the evening is to be about Cellini's hijinks, and it seems to be so designed, it should end on a merrier note involving the title character. On the other hand, Mayer's original ending is unacceptable: I suspect today's audiences would have trouble laughing at Cellini's literally pawning off Angela to the Duke, all the while suggesting to the Duchess that all is not over between them. Either way, without Paris, Cellini's last impression on the audience is that of a man saying either "love is my enemy," which makes the preceding three hours a lie, or, as in Mayer, that he didn't really love Angela to begin with—he just loved what she inspired in him—which is equally unsatisfying. In the latest ending, the show abruptly appears to have been the story of Angela and her encounter with the firebrand, not about the firebrand. And somehow that does not seem to be in the spirit of what has gone before.

James Lovensheimer is a doctoral candidate in musicology at Ohio State University, where he is writing a dissertation on Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. He worked in the professional theater for over twenty years before returning to academia.



The Duchess (Elaine Fox) emerges from her sedan chair. Photo: Matt Dilyard.

Press Clippings from Ohio Light Opera

Where has *The Firebrand of Florence* been all our lives? Sitting on a shelf, no doubt, depriving the world of a Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin score of rapturous and giddy inventiveness. The slumber is over. The Ohio Light Opera has dusted off the work and brought it to exuberant life at the College of Wooster's Freedlander Theatre for its first production since flopping on Broadway in 1945. Why the show had only forty-three performances at New York's Alvin Theatre and then slipped into oblivion will remain a mystery, at least in part. The original production was beset by casting problems, including the odd choice of Lotte Lenya, Weill's wife, as the Duchess. Critics found the work old-fashioned, an operetta disguised as a Broadway musical.

The opening of *Firebrand* is a brilliant twenty-minute sequence, completely sung, that encompasses preparation for Cellini's hanging, the public's affection for its city, and the pardon that will allow the hero to finish the statue he is creating for the dimwitted Duke of Florence. Listen to how Weill drapes lovely and chipper tunes around Gershwin's impish words—and you understand how unjust the neglect of *Firebrand* has been. Throughout the show, astonishing musical phrases are complemented by wise, winsome lyrics. The show is not without its longueurs, especially when Edwin Justus Mayer's book begins to run out of steam in Act II. By this time, the tale of Cellini's incorrigible behavior as citizen and lover has become a predictable foray into operetta land. The bitter-sweet ending isn't much improved as altered by James Stuart, the Ohio Light Opera's artistic director emeritus. Yet everything else about Stuart's staging emphasizes the enchantment that oozes from this delectable concoction. The atmosphere is usually whimsical, and the large cast musters bountiful energy to convey the cheerfulness. Carol Hageman's choreography adds immeasurable vitality to the proceedings, and she even has singers who can dance. Weill's choral writing is more sophisticated than most heard on Broadway, a fact the ensemble acknowledges with singing of superb suppleness and rhythmic point. Another pleasure is the orchestra, led by J. Lynn Thompson, which illuminates the colors and cheeky details in Weill's original orchestrations. No arguments, either, about the cast. Daniel Neer plays Cellini as part matinee idol, part rascal, and he uses his warm baritone with fine expressivity. The object of his

desire, at least some of the time, is Angela, whose lyrical lines are floated to lovely effect by Julie Wright. The show's nut is the Duke, also called Bumpy, a role to which Boyd Mackus brings typically lamebrained brio. Hearing and seeing the alluring Elaine Fox as the Duchess can only make one wonder what Weill had in mind when he insisted that the edgy Lenya play the part. Luckily, we don't have to wonder about *Firebrand* anymore. A trip to the Wooster version of Florence is highly recommended.

—Donald Rosenberg, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (19 June 1999)



Benvenuto Cellini (Daniel Neer) exhorts the crowd before a vertiginous Florentine backdrop (sets by Dale Seeds). Photo: Matt Dilyard.

The plot provides a certain degree of fun and intrigue. But what mostly makes this long-overdue revival worth the effort is Weill's exhilarating score and Gershwin's catchy lyrics.

From the extended opening sequence, with its exciting operatic ensembles, through several individual songs, *The Firebrand of Florence* will have audiences wondering why this show has been moldering in obscurity for more than half a century.

One reason might be a script (by Edwin Justus Mayer) that starts to meander part way through Act I and provides too many false endings. Given those problems, the act, at an hour and forty minutes, is far too long.

Act II is better, but here too an editor's pencil would be welcome, especially since there is so much about this show and its new production that is worth more than scant appearances at fifty-year intervals.

—Thomas Harper, *Alliance (Ohio) Review* (15 June 1999)

Books

Kurt Weill: Die frühen Werke 1916-1928

Edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn

Munich: edition text + kritik, 1998
(Musik-Konzepte 101/102) / ISBN 3-88377-590-8

For at least the last twenty years, Kurt Weill research has situated itself in relation to one dominant and nagging question: were Weill's American compositions of any artistic value, and did they have anything at all in common with his undeniably significant German oeuvre? The very formulation of this question reveals the aesthetic allegiance of the scholars who devoted their research to answering it: convinced by the project of modernism, they fought a long, hard battle to establish Kurt Weill as a modern composer, to find a philosophical justification for his embarrassing interest in the popular, and to "justify" his turn to Broadway.

It is perhaps surprising to see a new volume on Weill's works to 1928 matching so precisely the agenda outlined above, especially when the question itself is becoming so tiresome, now that we are approaching 2000 and surely no longer have to believe that modernism was somehow the only valid aesthetic of the twentieth century. Is the posture of this new volume intended to be provocative within the context of the well known "Musik-Konzepte" series, or are the authors feeling collective guilt about an issue that remains unaddressed in relation to Weill's early works?

As the first collection of essays devoted exclusively to Weill's early works, this volume seems to have several aims: 1) to document Weill's early career; 2) to introduce readers to a selection of Weill's early compositions; and 3) to prove that the roots of Weill's Broadway style are evident in many aspects of his early works (as if that would somehow validate the former). Jürgen Schebera describes Weill's early years in the first article in the volume, which is followed immediately by yet another edition of Weill's letters to Ferruccio Busoni (which have appeared in print twice before). These articles, along with the chronology, works list, and discography that conclude the book, were the most puzzling aspects of the volume for this reader. I felt compelled to flip back constantly and check the publication date. Not only does Schebera's article add little to the existing literature on the topic, it hardly even takes note of it. He also tends towards conjecture and an uncomfortable degree of admiration, for example, in phrases such as "The Weills were typical representatives of Jews who thought in German terms" ("Die Weills waren typische Vertreter eines deutsch denkenden Judentums," p. 6) or "The synagogue's inaugural ceremony was one of the first highlights in Weill's life, just before his eighth birthday." ("Die Einweihung der Synagoge war einer der ersten Höhepunkte im Leben des knapp achtjährigen Weill," p. 6).

The second aim of this volume, introducing readers to Weill's early works, is fulfilled in articles by Gunther Diehl and Ricarda Wackers. Since the former discusses a wide range of works little known to the general public, I find it a shame that he wraps his comments in such a thick and impenetrable net of academic jargon. His observations seem scattered, especially in terms of chronology. One wonders what Diehl actually hears in this music and what it means to him. Rather than tell us about the complex significance of these compositions, Diehl measures Weill's progress as a young composer almost exclusively on his ability to expand the tonal system, create complicated dissonance, emphasize "melody," and establish motivic links or logical unity. The most curious aspect of Diehl's analysis, however, is surely his attempt to understand Weill's progress as a result of the composer's interest in the listener ("Die Kategorie des Hörerbezugs," p. 63), and as a simultaneous continuation of and break with the past. I could only read this as the over-intellectualized

philosophy of someone who had not listened to music in a very long time. Ricarda Wackers, in contrast, keeps her article on Weill's *Der neue Orpheus* on a clearer and more descriptive level.

Already somewhat in despair over the historical and analytical content of this collection, I was relieved to land upon the articles by Nils Grosch and Andreas Hauff, who offer more provocative and interesting interpretations. Grosch focuses on the Novembergruppe, a group of artists whose concert activities were very important both for avant-garde music during the Weimar Republic in general, and for Weill's own career. Grosch, one of the few scholars to study this group, tells its story in gripping and fascinating detail. Although I sensed from his article that our understanding of the Novembergruppe may always be limited by the lack of existing documents, I admired Grosch for weaving a limited amount of material into an effective narrative.

Andreas Hauff, in his article about Weill's work for *Der deutsche Rundfunk*, emphasizes the sincerity with which Weill approached his involvement as a contributor to this journal. A few pages into the article, Hauff's objective becomes clear: he wants to document Weill's turn from art to popular music as it is revealed in his work for the radio. Although this subject seems somewhat harmless on the surface, it raises troublesome questions about an implied system of musical value. Hauff's discussion is highly problematic for two reasons. First, it lacks a definition of what constitutes "popular music"; Hauff simply lumps together "entertainment music" ("Unterhaltungsmusik," p. 94), Broadway, and foxtrot, and is thus able to demonstrate too easily the continuity of Weill's career through his continued, general interest in "the popular." Second, Hauff himself seems somewhat prejudiced against this "popular." Otherwise, why would he use expressions such as "the lowest level" ("das tiefste Niveau," p. 93) or "superficial news of the day" ("oberflächliche Tagesaktualität," p. 93)? And why would he cite Weill's comment that dance music reflects "the instinct of the masses" ("den Instinkt der Masse," p. 94), without remarking on it in any way? Indeed, even Hauff's attempt to prove that Weill's path to Broadway was determined by "a consciousness, developed from experience, that common reflection and communication by citizens of a democratic society was necessary in the institution of theater" ("ein aus Erfahrung gewachsenes Bewußtsein von der Notwendigkeit gemeinsamer Reflexion und Kommunikation von Bürgern einer demokratischen Gesellschaft in der Institution des Theaters," p. 104) seems like nothing more than another attempt to protect Weill from the dreaded fate of being a composer who wrote music to entertain.

The book closes with Stephen Hinton's well known article on misunderstanding *The Threepenny Opera*, which has already appeared in English in a highly accessible edition, and which hardly seems to belong here in that it counters and corrects some of the basic premises of the rest of the collection. Nevertheless, Hinton's article is by now a classic and is thus welcome in its German translation. It is followed by Diehl's seemingly random assortment of reviews pertaining to performances of Weill's early works, then by the brief biographical chronology, works list, discography, and selected bibliography mentioned above.

I put down this book with a sense of fatigue, disappointment, and confusion. Is this what Weill research is about? Are we really destined to keep on justifying Weill for the rest of the twenty-first century as well? Must musicology continue to sneer at the popular in order to maintain its treasured status as an academic discipline? And must we mold every single composer of the twentieth century into a little Schoenberg in disguise in order to accept him (rarely her) into our canon? Surely this new collection marks the end, rather than the beginning of a research tradition associated with Kurt Weill. Having read it, I now eagerly look forward to Weill's centennial year and the opportunity it will give us to branch out into new areas of scholarly research.

Tamara Levitz
Berlin

Books

Caspar Neher: Der größte Bühnenbauer unserer Zeit

Edited by Christine Tretow and Helmut Gier

Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997

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In his later years, Bertolt Brecht referred to his schoolmate from Augsburg (they were classmates at the *Realgymnasium* from 1911–1914) as “the greatest set designer of our time.” Likewise, Kenneth Tynan, for many years the Literary Manager of London’s National Theatre, spoke in the 1960s of the “greatest set designer in the world: Caspar Neher.” (Neher himself never liked the term “Bühnenbildner” because it did not take into account his total contribution.) Although there is nearly unanimous agreement about Neher’s importance to the development of stagecraft, the literature about him has been rather limited. Four years after Neher’s death in Vienna in 1962, Friedrich Verlag brought out the only extensively illustrated book devoted to Neher’s total output; edited by composer Gottfried von Einem and theater critic Siegfried Melchinger, it included essays and a complete scenography in the appendix. John Willett and Methuen published a catalog in 1986 for an exhibition of the Arts Council of Great Britain, *Caspar Neher: Brecht’s Designer*, followed in 1995 by *What Price Antiquity? Greeks and Romans on Caspar Neher’s Stage* published in Cologne and Vienna by Böhlau Verlag.

The present book attempts to look at the entire Caspar Neher and assess the importance of his wide-ranging activities. Derived from an April 1997 colloquium held in Augsburg to celebrate Neher’s 100th birthday, the eight essays investigate such diverse topics as Neher’s unique contribution to the development of the stage design in the twentieth century (Christine Tretow and Lothar Schirmer), his collaboration with Brecht (Egon Monk), and his work as opera librettist with composers Kurt Weill (Andreas Hauff) and Rudolf Wagner-Régeny (Arne Langer). Langer’s essay also includes interesting remarks and documents concerning the attitude Neher assumed during the Third Reich. Hans Jörg Jans analyzes Neher’s role as “scenic creator” in some of Carl Orff’s most important works, including *Carmina Burana*. In addition, there is a special contribution by John Willett (printed in the original English), “The Three Elements of Mahagonny.” Remaining true to the focus of this newsletter, I will concentrate on the articles by Hauff and Willett.

Hauff begins his essay by quoting letters from Kurt Weill to Neher that he found in Augsburg to demonstrate the high esteem in which Weill held Neher’s collaboration and friendship. After establishing contact by mail following the end of the war, Weill wrote to Neher on 2 July 1946: “There has hardly been a day when I didn’t think of you . . . when again and again I had to compare a stage setting with one of yours, only to find out that nobody here can hold a candle to you” (p. 91). In two large segments (“Weill, Neher, Brecht: Music and Scenery in the Epic Theater” and “Relations at

Times of Crisis”) Hauff follows the trio’s collaboration, making use of unknown material from Neher’s diary up to the point that Weill and Brecht parted company, and the composer decided to create an opera (*Die Bürgschaft*) with Neher as librettist. A third part—“Caspar, Erika, Kurt, Lenya”—is dedicated to personal relationships, especially Weill’s turning to Neher’s wife Erika after his separation from Lenya. Finally, in the fourth part (“After the War: Attempts to Reconnect”) Hauff prints more excerpts from the Weill-Neher postwar correspondence and summarizes two revivals of Weill’s works that he staged after the composer died: the first German performance of *Street Scene* in 1955 in Düsseldorf and the revival in West Berlin of *Die Bürgschaft* in 1957.

John Willett’s contribution rightfully postulates that all considerations of the genesis of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* should take into account Neher’s sets, especially his projections, as a third creative element of the work, equal in importance to Weill’s music and Brecht’s libretto. In support of this position, Willett claims that up until 1932 Neher’s projections were provided to theaters by Universal Edition along with the music and libretto. Since these projections have not been preserved as a unit, Willett presents a proposal for how they might be identified and reassembled, and thereafter reproduced and made available to theaters. Without considering how the unresolved questions and practical difficulties of such a project have affected the recognition of Neher’s contribution to the work, Willett proceeds to blame its abandonment on the legal representatives of Weill’s estate, who over the years have promoted performances by large opera houses. After quoting a sentence from David Drew’s *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (“The very nature of the work compels us to continue searching for ideal solutions long after we have recognized that there are none to be found”), Willett writes:

“Here it seems to me, if the problem is anything more than editorial, that ‘us’ and ‘we’ cannot be the same group of persons. For the former must surely start with those who understand the ‘epic’ or montage structure and the principle of ‘Trennung der Elemente’ as against Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. While the second lot are primarily those who are convinced that the great opera houses are the right place for Weill’s operatic work and that his music must always be given priority in any encounter with the other arts. So far this has been the position of the Kurt Weill Foundation, who have chosen to ignore the

problems of scale . . . and the claims of Neher and the Third Element. If these are not taken into account, then of course no ideal solution will be found” (p. 88).

These railing, even harsh, words might be justified if one is disturbed by some of the recent stagings of the opera (the last one being Peter Zadek’s horrendous Salzburg production in 1998). But on one point the “Brecht disciple” Willett is mistaken: it is certain that Weill conceived and wrote the opera *Mahagonny* for opera houses. How is it possible, seventy years later, to preserve the Neher element and bring it into harmony with the today’s completely different concept of stage direction and scenic design? Or how can Neher’s contributions be enforced at a time when theaters and opera houses are director-driven, often with little regard given to the intentions of the creators? Here Willett’s polemics lead into a no-man’s land of purely wishful thinking.

Jürgen Schebera
Berlin



Performances and Recordings

The Silver Lake

London

Broomhill Opera in Wilton's Music Hall

1-19 April 1999

Der Silbersee

London Sinfonietta

Markus Stenz, conductor

RCA 09026 63477 2

Broomhill, in Kent, was the country house of Sir David Salomons, a Victorian pioneer for the rights of Jews to hold office, Member of Parliament, then Lord Mayor of London. It's now a community center. In a theater beside the house, Broomhill Opera, an adventurous small company, began. (There I enjoyed the premiere of Andrew Toovey's *The Juniper Tree*.) The company kept the name when it migrated to the modern theater at Christ's Hospital school, also in Kent. (There I enjoyed a trim, attractive account of Handel's *Tolomeo*.) Then it moved to London, to reawaken with music-drama London's oldest surviving music hall, Wilton's. There Broomhill Opera played its run of Kurt Weill's *The Silver Lake*.

The places and the pieces performed are recalled to suggest how Broomhill Opera differs from the dozen and more small opera companies currently active in Britain and touring, for the most part, standard repertory. Wilton's was an apt home for *Der Silbersee*. The music hall opened in 1858, closed in 1881, served as a Methodist church, a mission hall, a rag warehouse, and is now a theater again. Shabby, intimate, and welcoming, it stands where London's richest and poorest boroughs, the City and Tower Hamlets, meet, just off Cable Street, the scene of a famous 1936 London street battle against Oswald Mosley's fascists. In

its Victorian heyday, 1,500 people would pack into Wilton's. As set up for *The Silver Lake*, with a forestage jutting out into the auditorium, it held 300.

Der Silbersee was composed for the combined lyric, dramatic, orchestral, and scenic resources of German theaters: a three-hour play with eighty-four minutes of music. That has inhibited its revival in days when opera companies and theater companies have become increasingly distinct. On 18 February 1933, *Der Silbersee* had simultaneous premieres at Leipzig's Altes Theater, Magdeburg's Stadttheater, and Erfurt's Stadttheater. It was acclaimed. But Hitler had just become chancellor. Nine days later, at the Reichstag, the Weimar Republic went up in flames, and a decade of high political and theatrical adventure ended. *Der Silbersee* was the last achievement in Germany of Kurt Weill, of Georg Kaiser (whose *Mississippi* had, in 1930, opened simultaneously in sixteen German theaters), and of Gustav Brecher, who conducted the Leipzig premiere.

The piece is subtitled *ein Wintermärchen*, a winter's fairy tale.



The repentant policeman Olim (Danny Sapani) holds the iconic pineapple. Photo: Annard/Broomhill.

Kaiser's play assembled traditional fairy tale ingredients—a lake, an enchanted forest, a dungeon, a poor orphan, a greedy witch—in a modern tale of capitalist injustice and decent (also indecent) human behavior. Gordon Anderson, the director of

the Broomhill production, played it straight and true, without seeking to underline either period elements or modern parallels with a Britain where the National Lottery each week now creates new millionaires, like Olim, and food-store pricing practices again cause concern. Straight, true, non-interventionist presentations of operas, shows that let the listeners discover the underlying morals for themselves, have become increasingly rare. This *Silver Lake* was knock-out direct, unfalsified. We'd hardly expect otherwise, given that David Drew is now Broomhill Opera's dramaturg.

And it was musically powerful. Michael Hart-Davis was an impassioned, puzzled, poignant, angry Severin, a "young-heroic" tenor role composed as if for Max in *Der Freischütz*. Danny Sapani was moving as Olim, the cop with a conscience, who has little to sing but much to express. Ali McGregor, the Fennimore, had the directness and candor of a true Weill heroine. Buffy Davis enjoyed herself a bit too much, perhaps, as Frau von Luber. Sentiment—Kaiser and Weill both laid it on a bit thick at times—wasn't shirked. This was a bold, fresh, vigorous, stirring presentation.

There was a neat new English translation, by Rory Bremner. Thomas Hadley's designs were simple and striking. Charles Hazlewood conducted a spirited orchestra. The company's next venture is to be a *Beggar's Opera* (John Gay's, not the *Dreigroschenoper*), freshly scored by Jonathan Lloyd.

Der Silbersee reached Britain in 1982, in a Manchester University student performance conducted by Ian Kemp. London saw the piece in 1987, directed (and translated) by John Eaton. Then in 1996 Weill's score was performed at the BBC Proms—to the audience of thousands in the Royal Albert Hall and the many thousands more on worldwide radio. That Prom performance—just Weill's numbers, not Kaiser's play—is the basis of the RCA *Silbersee* recording. It is cast at strength, with a Tristan and Siegfried, Heinz Kruse, as an excellent Severin; a former Brünnhilde and Isolde, Helga Dernes, vivid as Frau von Luber; Bayreuth Mimes and Loges, Graham Clark

and Heinz Zednik, trenchant as the Lottery Agent and Baron Laur. Only the Fennimore, Juanita Lascarro, is rather disappointing; she sings the notes sweetly but doesn't hit the words hard enough.

The Prom performance, sung in German, had some connective dialogue in English, devised by Jeremy Sams. Peter Sidhom was the Olim; in the recording, HK Gruber takes over the role and delivers—in German, of course, and in masterly manner—the big monologue of the policeman who questions the “rules” and decides to break with them. Olim sings in only one number, a duet with Severin, and there Gruber sounds a bit feeble. But in the long melodrama, as he pens his report and, prompted by offstage choral interjections, reflects on it, Gruber is eloquent. Paul Whelan and Gidon Saks, the gravediggers in the first sung number, are a knock-out pair. The shopgirls, Catrin Wyn-Davies and Katarina Karnéus, are sweetly, naively insidious.

I'm hardly a “sane” critic of Kurt Weill. From the moment *Der Silbersee* begins and I hear the London Sinfonietta players, under Markus Stenz, sounding and shaping those spare, definite, lyrical lines, I start to “tingle,” still responding as long ago I responded when first hearing Mahler's song-cycles or Schubert's *Winterreise*. With a sudden move to the major, Weill can turn me to jelly. *Der Silbersee*, coming between *Die Bürgschaft* and the *Seven Deadly Sins*, contemporary with the Second Symphony, is a rich, exciting, marvelous score, holding in a new balance the song style, the neo-Verdian operatic manner, and orchestral writing in which *Magic Flute* gravity mingles with *Magic Flute* lightness. And it's very well performed.

Andrew Porter
London



Performances

Street Scene

Denver, Colorado
Central City Opera

Premiere: 10 July 1999

In an age when musical blockbusters are marked by star-studded casts, syrupy storylines, and truckloads of extravagant scenery, a fifty-year-old ensemble piece like Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* seems destined to remain mothballed under layers of critical and scholarly acclaim. But in Central City Opera's version, director Michael Ehrman's character-driven approach, a host of fine performances, and a magnificent set all breathed vibrant life into Weill's 1947 Broadway opera.

All of the action in the show, which is based on Elmer Rice's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1929 play, takes place on a street fronting a New York City tenement house. Exquisitely designed by David Harwell, the drab brownstone looked as though it was a few sewer covers north of Manhattan's gritty Hell's Kitchen area. On the eve of the Great Depression, the district was a mix of mostly immigrant families struggling to eke out a meager existence while maintaining tradition and order. The blighted urban maze was a tough place to live, sure, but families—not yuppies and drug dealers—formed the neighborhood's basic infrastructure.

And as Weill's “dramatic musical” (with lyrics by poet Langston Hughes) unfolded on the jewel-box opera house's tiny stage, Ehrman and company managed to evoke the allure and magic of old Broadway without using a simulated natural disaster, a parade of cartoon characters, or a slew of puppets to get the job

done. Indeed, city dwellers young and old fell in and out of love, gave birth, and hatched grand philosophical ideas. They struck up impromptu ice-cream festivals, kicked up their heels like jitterbugging fiends, or yearned for a more bucolic life. Along the curbside, they swapped dozens of yarns and decried the triple scourges of free love, birth control, and loose women. And, near the play's end, they witnessed jealous rage culminate in murderous tragedy.

There are no Pepsodent-smile kick-line numbers or easily hummable theme songs in Weill's eclectic score—just a couple of sublime choruses, a handful of heartrending arias and some exuberantly staged group songs. Nor is there one larger-than-life central character (unless it's Harwell's richly detailed tenement house) on whose shoulders the bulk of Rice's dramatic



Proud mother Anna Maurant (Kay Paschal) with her son Willie (Steven Mudd). Photo: Mark Kiryluk.



The Ice Cream Sextet, from left: Mrs. Fiorentino (Karen Frankenstein), Mrs. Jones (Joyce Campana), Mr. Fiorentino (Jonathan Green), Mr. Jones (Steven Kirchgraber), and Mr. Olsen (Craig Phillips). Photo: Mark Kiryluk.

action rests. Instead, the story's shifting tides of passion are given full expression by the tumultuous comings and goings of more than thirty-five singing actors, shepherded by a quartet of protagonists.

In keeping with the CCO's laudable commitment to foster the development of promising young singers, the company was led by former apprentices who returned to the Colorado mountain town to assume principal duties: Karen Burlingame portrayed devoted daughter and aspiring actress Rose Maurant; Theodore Green played bookish, all-around good guy Sam Kaplan. Their voices soared with heartfelt feeling during the duet, "Remember That I Care"; later, the pair of "best friends" also jerked a few tears as they sang, "Now love and death have linked their arms together." Burlingame, in particular, proved just as authentic during scenes of spoken dialogue, crossing her arms and casting her eyes heavenward as the grief-stricken Rose murmured, "Some things I think you have to face alone." And although Sam the dreamer seemed melodramatic by today's standards (especially when the budding Trotskyite ranted about life being little more than "Pain, brutality, and strife until we die"), his fervor arose more from the playwright's hyperbole than from Green's bold interpretation. In fact, the plucky tenor imbued Sam's moving aria, "Lonely House," with an intriguing mixture of clo-

quence and droll humor as he observed, "Funny you can be so lonely with all these folks around."

The demanding roles of Rose's warring parents, Anna and Frank Maurant, were superbly rendered by veteran singers Kay Paschal and Marc Embree (who also portrayed the doomed couple in a recent Berlin production). Although she was occasionally overpowered by conductor John Baril's otherwise resplendent orchestra, Paschal exuded Anna's aching desire and boundless capacity for affection during the whole of her lengthy aria, "Somehow I Never Could Believe." And the dynamic soprano located Anna's wistful heartache during "I Tried to Be a Good Wife to Him," accepting—however unfairly—blame for her failed marriage as she declared, "Sometimes I think it would be better if I was dead." Minutes later, Paschal negotiated another of Anna's hairpin emotional turns when she heaped motherly praise on her son, Willie. Beaming with joy that seemed heaven-sent, she gently sang to him, "Somebody's going to be so handsome/Somebody's going to make me so proud" as daughter Rose gazed admiringly from the apartment building's shadowy doorway. As Anna's embittered husband, Embree embodied Frank's stubbornly proud, bellicose way with others, grouching that the world would be a better place if things were like they used to be, "safe and sound"—bravado that rang hol-

low when Frank later decided to murder his wife and her lover. In a scene that was rivetingly staged by Ehrman (who has directed all four offerings in Central City's ongoing "American Series"), Embree summoned near-primal rage while haltingly confessing, "It might not look like it to you/But I loved her, too" to his family, the police—and us. It wasn't the easiest of Hughes's lyrics to sing convincingly, but Embree pulled it off with admirable aplomb.

All of the supporting actors conveyed their characters' idiosyncrasies without overly emphasizing the quaintness of thirties slang. With her droopy eyes alternately casting suspicion and contempt, Joyce Campana seemed born to play stoop-gossip Emma Jones—

especially when she spied the flirting Rose and purred, "You have plenty of admirers, Miss Maurant, but you seem to come by it naturally." As Russian immigrant Abraham Kaplan, Gene Scheer was properly indignant about American social conditions but stopped short of inciting an International Workers of the World rally. Christina Harrop and Curtis Olds danced their way into audience members' hearts with a thrilling rendition of "Moon Faced, Starry Eyed." Bursting with joy while proffering ice-cream cones to his neighbors, Jonathan Green was pure confection as Lippo Fiorentino. And several members of the Colorado Children's Chorale added sparkle to the sometimes dreary goings-on. All of which made Weill's period drama a moving examination of the recurring familial conflicts that, these days, at least, are often reduced to the lulla-babble of celebrated Broadway.

**Jim Lillie
Denver**

Jim Lillie is the theater critic for Denver's alternative newsweekly, *Westword*, where portions of this article originally appeared.

Performances

One Touch of Venus

Freiburg Theater

Premiere: 23 December 1998

One Touch of Venus is not the first musical theater work in which a statue made of stone turns into flesh and blood. Franz von Suppé had already travestied Ovid's Pygmalion episode in his 1865 "comic-mythological" opera, *Die schöne Galathée*, which, by the way, was on the schedule of the ducal theater in Weill's hometown of Dessau in 1915. But *One Touch of Venus* is set in New York in the 1940s. Weill, librettist S. J. Perelman (scriptwriter for the Marx Brothers' films), and lyricist Ogden Nash created a musical comedy about the eccentric New York millionaire and art expert Whitelaw Savory and a statue he carried off from Anatolia, which might remind today's audiences of Woody Allen's comedies (most aptly, *Mighty Aphrodite*): a hint of sex and crime, a lot of slapstick comedy, wordplay, and social satire. Musically it lies somewhere between an operetta and a musical, with echoes of Gershwin, some borrowed elements of swing and country music—and,

of course, a little barbershop quartet for the barbershop scenes.

Written during the war in 1943—and opening right after the Holocaust protest *We Will Never Die*—*Venus* is Weill's lightest and most captivating stage work, as if it were a loving-ironic glance at the daily life of New York in an effort to forget the European nightmare. Still, the authors did not allow fantasy to take over the plot; instead they pulled the characters back to reality. Frightened by the idea of spending her life at the side of a loving, but middle-class, barber, Rodney Hatch, in the modern suburb of Ozone Heights, Venus flees to her Olympic world, leaving only a stone image behind. But in her place she sends the lonely barber a young woman from Ozone Heights, and they hit it off right away. This feel-good ending might have been a concession to the audience, but on a deeper level it reflects Weill's concept of musical theater: to dole out classic values and tradition to the audience in small, manageable doses. *One Touch of Venus* is of course also an emancipation story with meaning for everyone: Rodney frees himself from a constricting relationship with an unsympathetic fiancée and becomes a new, freer person. "Some girls have a touch of Venus" is a confidence-builder for women. It even appears that Savory might be healed of his cynicism. As entertaining as the play is, there is also much to learn from it.

The premiere in the Freiburg Theater (the second production in Germany following Meiningen's attempt in 1994) was rewarding musically. Patrik Ringborg, who will become artistic director of Dessau's Kurt-Weill-Fest in 2000, conducted the orchestra of the city of Freiburg with remarkable attention to the formal structure of Weill's score. *One Touch of Venus* is more than a series of pleasing and well-orchestrated songs; it is also much more than an indubitable co-opting and parody of older forms. Weill's borrowings and references achieve a significant dramaturgical function, so that at times the music seems to be driving the plot, rather than the other way around.

In contrast, Markus Kupferblum's staging came across as some-

what heavy-handed, and the Freiburg ensemble did not live up to its reputation, delivering poorly prepared dialogue and amateurish acting. There was nothing to balance the cheap laughs elicited by the detectives' childish mannerisms or the hectic and usually superfluous interludes of the ballet troupe in the background. Rarely did a joke make its point, and the German supertitles for the English-language songs failed to capture the wit of the original.

The second act was more engaging than the first. Stage designer Hans Kudlich scored two stunning visual points with Savory's multidimensional bed and Venus's clamshell automobile. The main characters also seemed less inhibited, even when their acting capabilities lagged behind their singing talents. Although a bit too old for the part, Sabine Schmidt-Kirchner made a convincing Venus, with great stage presence, a sensual voice, and dry humor. Sigrun Schell, playing Savory's impertinent secretary Molly, grew noticeably in stature, but she had to play opposite Jaakko Kortekangas's pale portrayal of Savory—more weak than diabolical. Fabrice Dalis, as the barber Hatch, also revealed his charm for the first time in Act II. Thirty-nine additional actors played their roles well, considering the extravagant number of scenes in a production that lacked both spirit and grace. Apparently dreaming of the glitz and glamor of Broadway, the production team made the show (in the first act, at least) look like the worst kind of provincial German operetta.

The Freiburg production is unfortunately not a singular event, but a symptom. Many directors on the German stage seem to believe that operetta and musicals are genres in which they can quickly, and without much effort, satisfy the basic entertainment needs of an unsophisticated audience. Luckily there have been a few marvelous examples to the contrary during the past season: Anouk Niklisch's staging of von Suppé's *Die schöne Galathée* (coupled with Schoenberg's *Von Heute auf Morgen!*) in a small city theater in Koblenz, and Peter Kock's and Stanley Walden's staging of Sondheim's *Into the Woods* at this year's Kurt Weill Festival in Dessau. Why shouldn't *One Touch of Venus* get a third chance? To be sure, a German translation that captures the charm and humor of the original is sorely needed.

Andreas Hauff
Mainz



Venus (Sabine Schmidt-Kirchner) and Rodney (Fabrice Dalis) tool around in her clamshell car. Photo: Klaus Fröhlich.

Performances

“Brecht-Weill Evening”

Copenhagen, Denmark

Royal Theatre

May 1999

The Royal Theater in Copenhagen, in collaboration with the Danish National Opera, observed the Lenya-Weill celebrations of 1998-2000 with six performances of a triple bill of Weill's settings of texts by Bertolt Brecht: *Das Berliner Requiem*, *Der Lindberghflug*, and *Die sieben Todsünden*. The performance was supported by the Goethe Institute in Copenhagen, and for that reason most of the soloists were German guest artists and the works accordingly performed in the original German. The sets and direction were by the young Danish media artist of Dutch origin, Jacob F. Schokking, whose trademark technique involves a combination of music, acting, computer graphics, and video.

In 1936, *The Seven Deadly Sins* could not be performed in Copenhagen without public scandal, and this was true in 1999 as well. Well before the premiere, controversy arose between the excellent Danish Brecht interpreter Birgitte Bruun and the Royal Theater. Bruun claimed that she had acquired exclusive rights from Warner Chappell [a company that does not control any rights in the work—ed.] to stage *Die sieben Todsünden* in Copenhagen with herself in the role of Anna I, while the Royal Theater insisted on its legal rights, confirmed by a different publisher, to stage the piece with the German singer Sabine Passow in the starring role. When supporters of Birgitte Bruun distributed handbills of protest to the premiere audience, the theater reportedly paid Bruun a settlement of \$14,000!

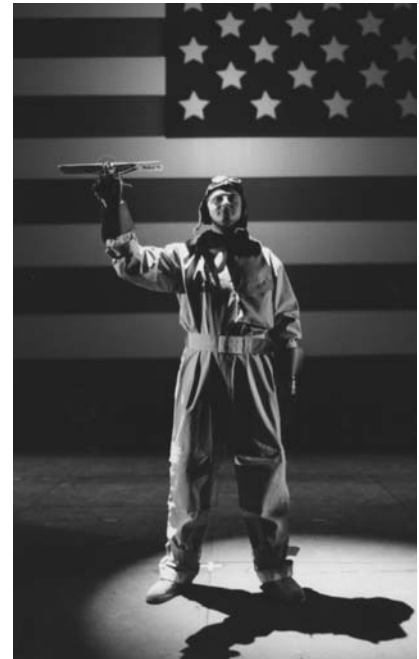
Local controversies aside, Jacob Schokking's solution for staging the two works intended for concert performance was very convincing. In *Berliner Requiem*, Brecht's morbid poems about death and war and Weill's acrid music hit the audience with their frightening topicality. Video projections reinforced the performance, showing images such as the body of

a drowned woman and “live” footage of soldiers (played by the male choir) marching along while singing the “Dankchoral.” Schokking also added a few props, including a heavy tombstone to be laid on top of the unknown soldier.

The same technique was used in *Der Lindberghflug* in a surprisingly poetic way. The personification on stage of the wind, the snow, the motor, and sleep, combined with projections of Lindbergh's face and a miniature aircraft in his hands, provided a touching background for the singing of the text. Although the effect lessened the didactic element, the enhanced human drama and the retention of a slight *Verfremdung* made the performance definitely worth seeing. (A side note: The work was billed with the rather awkward title, “*Der Ozeanflug* by Bertolt Brecht set to music by Kurt Weill as *Der Lindberghflug*,” and a spoken prologue had to be read before each performance stating Brecht's renunciation of Lindbergh's later political inclinations. The text, however, retained the name of Charles Lindbergh throughout. This distraction aside, the performance convinced anyone in doubt that Weill's version is far superior to the original Weill-Hindemith version.)

The main piece of the evening—and the most problematic in terms of staging—was *Die sieben Todsünden*. Nothing can blur the fact that it is one of Weill's best scores, if not *the* best, with its grand symphonic idioms mixed with depraved cabaret and barbershop styles. Of the two options available, the moral or the parodic, Schokking clearly chose the latter approach. His almost cartoon-like sets, though witty and creative in many details, took the sting out of Brecht's moral tale.

Sabine Passow as Anna I, using a mixture of sung and spoken words, did not do full justice to the score, and Ann Kolvig as Anna II had very little dancing to do, considering that the work is identified as a *ballet-chanté* and was originally written for the dancer Tilly Losch



Lindbergh (Lothar Odinius) holding aloft his miniature aircraft. Photo: Martin Mydtskov Rønne.

and choreographed by George Balanchine. The Copenhagen Anna II, worn out, mainly walked around or rested on sofas and armchairs. The directorial coup of the performance featured the appearance of nightclub patrons watching Anna's striptease. They turned out to be the male choir, projected via video, standing at the bar in front of the huge, naked Poseidon in the foyer of the Royal Theater!

On the whole, this production proved that these works from the Weimar years can withstand bold experimentation, and even when presented in a completely different historical context, they still carry messages worth considering.

Niels Krabbe
Danish Royal Library and editor-in-chief of
the Carl Nielsen Edition



Sabine Passow (Anna I) and Ann Kolvig (Anna II) rest on the sofa. Photo: Martin Mydtskov Rønne.

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