Books

**Dazzler: The Life and Times of Moss Hart**

Steven Bach


Anyone wanting to write about Moss Hart faces one major hurdle: Hart’s own memoir *Act One*. It is, as they say, a tough act to follow. Steven Bach had the additional obstacle of the non-cooperation of Kitty Carlisle Hart, Moss Hart’s widow. Bach has, however, written a detailed and sympathetic treatment of his subject, carefully attending to the recollections of those who knew Hart, the documents of his life, and the broader world he lived in. *The Hart of Act One*, beloved by all theater fans, told of how his love of theater brought him from poverty to fame. Bach, in delineating Hart’s invention of himself, shows that Hart was more complicated and conflicted than he let us know.

Bach’s portrait of Hart shows the effort that went into the making of the man in the splendid, carefully posed Irving Penn photograph on the dust jacket: a handsome, well-dressed, elegant gentleman. As he proceeds, Bach corrects *Act One* several times: Hart expanded his years in the fur company and omitted his employment at National Cloak and Suit. He killed off his Aunt Kate before she became, as she did in real life, a troublesome arsonist. Misrepresentations are, of course, part of the process of self-invention, and Bach exposes Hart’s lies about his education (he said he had studied creative writing at Columbia University; he hadn’t), his draft status (he said the Navy turned him down for “insufficient education”; it didn’t), even about when and how many tennis lessons he had had.

From young adulthood, Hart showed signs of manic-depression. For this and other reasons he eventually began psychotherapy. The influence of psychiatrists on twentieth-century men of the theater—judging from the impression left by their biographers—has been, generally speaking, unfortunate. Their emphasis appears to have been less on the patient’s self-discovery than on his conformity to the therapist’s views. George Gershwin’s psychiatrist diagnosed his neurological problems as neurotic ones. The psychiatrists who tried to cure the homosexuality of Tennessee Williams, Jerome Robbins, and Montgomery Clift may not have killed them but seemed more effective at damage than cure. Hart’s intense and frequent sessions with his therapist did, however, produce one success: *Lady in the Dark*. Hart often drew on real people for characters in his plays (most famously perhaps Alexander Woollcott in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and Franklin D. Roosevelt in *I’d Rather Be Right*), but here the character of Liza Elliott, the lady in the dark, was himself, the patient in analysis. Like his accounts of every production Hart was involved in, Bach’s account of this production is thorough and entertaining. He tells, for example, how and why Gertrude Lawrence made “The Saga of Jenny” one of the show’s hits although she had initially refused to sing it. The tale is a show business classic.

Kurt Weill makes his first appearance at this point. When he met Hart in 1939, Weill was having a Broadway success with *Knickerbocker Holiday*. His music and orchestrations would be a major part of the success of *Lady in the Dark*. In addition, he introduced Hart to Harry Horner. Horner, a Czech emigré and “visual genius,” had trained with Max Reinhardt. Without Horner, Bach believes, the dream sequences for *Lady in the Dark* “would have been impossible.” Weill turns up again in 1945 when Kitty Carlisle’s agent argues that the part Weill had written for Lotte Lenya in a new show called *The Firebrand of Florence* should go to Kitty Carlisle (not yet involved with Hart romantically). In the end, Lenya got the part.

*Dazzler* guides us through Broadway and Hollywood before and after World War II. Bach’s account of the production of *Winged Victory* and the tour of military bases in the South Pacific with *The Man Who Came to Dinner* provides a theatrical perspective on the war years as well. Hart’s career on Broadway and in Hollywood includes a large and mostly stellar cast of characters (Marilyn Miller, Beatrice Lillie, Noel Coward, Clifton Webb, Irving Lazar, Dore Schary, Leonard Sillman, George Kaufman). Lesser-known, but no less interesting persons also appear as important figures in Hart’s professional and personal life. While establishing the connections, charting the successes and failures, Bach notes the relationships and experiences that preoccupy the playwright and spark his imagination. He tracks, for example, Hart’s conflict with his own father as reflected in his works. He sees Hart’s sympathy for actors and his skill in dealing with them as deriving from his own stage experience as well as from his memory of the tongue-lashing he saw Basil Dean give another actor. He even notes the continuing influence of George Kelly on both Hart’s acting and playwriting, particularly in that playwright’s one-act *The Flattering Word*.

Bach’s discussions of Hart’s productions all have their interesting moments, but the one of *My Fair Lady* has the most excitement. Guiding us through the maze of the Shaw estate, the influence of Gabriel Pascal, the bad behavior of Rex Harrison, and Hart’s Higgins-Eliza relationship with Julie Andrews, Bach’s account is as compelling a show business tale as *Act One*’s background for *Once in a Lifetime*.

At the end of this biography one feels well informed about the life and the world of Moss Hart. Bach depicts his subject from his birth at the “wrong end” (as Hart said) of Fifth Avenue through his career as writer, producer, and director. He introduces the many people Hart worked with, discovered, helped and, in some cases, deceived or abandoned, but somehow the man himself is elusive. It may not, of course, be possible to find him. The man who could decorate his Ansonia apartment in the Spanish style, his Waldorf suite with English antiques, his Pennsylvania farm with American colonial artifacts, and his East Side town house in Victorian style is the man Moss Hart invented, an actor who suited himself to the occasion, ultimately Moss Hart, the charming, talented, well-dressed man of the Penn photograph. Bach’s sympathetic treatment of Kitty Carlisle Hart, though, suggests that there may be another story, the story of a Moss Hart known only to her.

Joseph Kissane
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Books

**Opernführer für Fortgeschrittene**

**Das 20. Jahrhundert I: Von Verdi und Wagner bis zum Faschismus**

Ulrich Schreiber

ISBN: 3-7618-1436-4

Following extremely favorable reviews for the first two volumes of this four-volume series, “History of Musical Theatre” (vol. 1: From the Genre’s Beginnings to the French Revolution; vol. 2: The 19th Century), the publication of the first of two parts on the 20th century has been much anticipated. As indicated by the title, the concept of this series allows the reader to see the place of each work within the context of the genre’s history of music and ideas. Therefore, it may not be surprising that the beautifully edited volume, comprising over 700 pages, poses some challenges to the reader. Ulrich Schreiber surveys the territory in question (“From Verdi and Wagner to Fascism”) from a standpoint of profound knowledge, presents an abundance of interesting facts, explores (hidden) connections, and also considers “off-road terrain” of the development of opera. In short: Even though the author does not address trained scholars, reading the book requires the highest degree of concentration, not least on account of the concise, even compressed, prose.

The book is divided into five historical chapters, interrupted by two monographic way stations dedicated to the “pillars of repertory,” Richard Strauss (the subtitle “Destined to Become a Classic” comes from René Leibowitz) and Giacomo Puccini (“Abundance of Melodious Sound,” inspired by a characterization from Thomas Mann). Extensive introductions to individual chapters as well as numerous bold subheadings permit quick orientation, especially if the volume is used as a reference work. The first chapter’s heading, “The Circumpolar Opera”—Schreiber adopts a term coined by Theodor Kroyer as early as in 1920—outlines the situation of those German operas created in the overpowering shadow of Richard Wagner “which found their claim for aesthetic autonomy more in distancing themselves from him than in attempting to become his heirs” (p. 20). Subsequently, the conditions for the development of Italian opera among Verdi’s successors are recounted. The historical arch in this volume ends with the development’s disruption by growing fascism in Europe (“Italy’s Path from Futurism to Fascism” and “German Opera under the Third Reich”).

Placed in the center, the most crucial and largest chapter (over 230 pages) focuses on the development of German opera between World War I and the Third Reich (“Von Heute auf Morgen oder Hin und Zurück”). At its beginning Schreiber outlines the essential features of “the almost unstoppable time machine of opera development between 1915 and 1930” (p. 391). Because the picture given here of the progressive and emancipatory efforts is so reliable, especially of younger composers between Max Brand and Alexander Zemlinsky, a certain tendency toward bold catchphrases is acceptable (e.g., “away from the Wagnerian model,” “opera’s social utopia,” “renunciation of soundpainting illusionism”).

Already in this context Schreiber highlights the special significance of Kurt Weill as one of those composers (in addition to Schreker, Krenek, and Hindemith) who “consciously linked their topics, bearing in part on the Zeitoper genre, to a reduction of complexity in musical material [Materialstand] (p. 394). Just like his fellow composers he suffered a double ostracism, first in 1933 by the Nazis, then after 1945 by the preachers of serialism; only in his work, however, did the influences of a contemporary style accumulate in such an intense fashion.

Schreiber dedicates the last forty pages of this chapter exclusively to Weill’s works. The Adorno essay named in the heading—“Restitution by Truth” (taken from his review of the Frankfurt performance of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1928)—marks the starting position of Weill reception insofar as the aesthetic significance still ascribed here to the work (*Die Dreigroschenoper* as the most important event in contemporary musical theater next to Berg’s *Wozzeck*) forms exactly the argumentative basis for later criticism of the Broadway composer. Schreiber begins by sketching Weill’s intricate, multi-dimensional reception history (conflicts with a romanticist aestheticism, co-opting by the process of commercialization, the critical stigma caused by the overpowering success of *Die Dreigroschenoper*) and the significance of the scholarly and artistic efforts for a Werkkreis, which are hardly common in current dealings with and productions of Weill’s compositions for the theater. Hereafter, it is intelligently laid out how the young Weill, in an independent grappling with Busoni’s aesthetic, outlines his own musicodramaturgical concept whose first impressive embodiment is presented in the one-act opera *Der Protagonist* (“Music as Action,” “dissillusionment of the theatrical event”). For the ensuing path “toward an epic musical theater” Schreiber properly clarifies the respective contributions of Weill and Brecht. A detailed and extensive assessment of the *Mahagonny Sängspiel* serves this purpose: Brecht regarded the conceptual style elements as signs of a theatrical art for new audiences whereas Weill viewed them as a “redemption of Busoni’s theories about the liquidation of the adventure-like and illusionist theater” (p. 593). The center of gravity is formed by the discussions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*; they represent ideal commentaries as promised in the preface, revealing the reasons for compositional decisions down to the smallest detail (alas, limited space allows for only a few examples). In his interpretative evaluations of *Die Burgschaft* and *Der Silbersee*—the latter work also marks the chapter’s end—Schreiber emphasizes the symbolic quality of these works under the political circumstances of the time and honors the dedication that informs the recasting of a sociocritical stance into an artistic expression (“The culinary elements of the song style oriented by entertainment culture are abandoned and sharpened into criticism,” p. 617).

Conclusion: There is a world of difference between Schreiber’s concept and that of a traditional opera guide which treats operas simply as familiar plots retold with the aid of music. Throughout his book, Schreiber points the advanced operagoer to facets of musicostructural phenomena in which the impact of the whole opera as a staged event is essentially rooted, and he enables the listener/spectator to see the single work embedded in a web of historical genre influences. Some subjective remarks by the “music critic” Schreiber as well as his prefatory statement highlighting the work-of-art character of the operas appear to be problematic; on the whole, however, his unarguable competence as well as the eloquence of his portrayal outweigh any doubt.
Books

Kurt Weill. Briefe an die Familie (1914–1950)

Edited by Lys Symonette and Elmar Juchem with assistance from Jürgen Schebera

ISBN: 3-476-45244-1

After the release of Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya (edited and translated by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke. Univ. of California Press, 1996), a second large body of correspondence by Kurt Weill is now available in Briefe an die Familie. As with the Weill-Lenya correspondence, the editors chose to publish the documents in their entirety. This was a wise decision, despite scattered and arguably unjustified criticism about this policy in the case of Speak Low, since it allows readers to make their own judgments rather than depending on the editors’ subjectivity. Speak Low had disappointed those musicologists who had hoped for clues about issues ranging from the extent of Weill’s influence on Brecht’s aesthetics to the possibility of “exile traces” in Weill’s Second Symphony. Nor, for that matter, did the letters seem to reveal any hidden programs in Weill’s work that could be readily used as tools for a semantic analysis. Yet the unbiased reader has discovered many treasures in these sources that will serve as research material for many years to come. And how will people fare when scrutinizing the newly published family correspondence? These documents should be used to draw a more accurate portrait of Weill, correcting old flaws wherever necessary.

We already know Weill was a negligent archivist. But whereas Lotte Lenya seems to have rescued some of the letters addressed to Weill, almost no such letters survive within the family correspondence (in any case, the book in hand restricts itself to letters written by Weill). Thanks to the work of Lys Symonette—whose editorial achievements left a profound mark on the Weill-Lenya edition—and the young Weill scholar Elmar Juchem, these unfortunate gaps have been competently bridged (filling them would have been impossible). The editors devote themselves so thoroughly to explaining every single point that in some cases they lose all sense of what can be taken for granted, as when they gloss “anti-Semitic” as “having an anti-Jewish attitude.” On the whole, however, the accuracy and competence reflected in the editorial apparatus is astounding. In spite of the correspondence’s one-sided nature, hardly a question remains unanswered; even the non-specialist reader will grasp the larger context.

The bulk of the family correspondence comprises Weill’s letters to his brother Hans, only one year his senior. As “friend and brother (on the side)” he discusses with Hans family matters (“Now I’m going to glean apples with Grandpa”), school issues (“I asked Piefke why I didn’t get an A in conduct”), the course of World War I (“Well, in the West the great regrouping has been accomplished”), as well as subsequent political turmoil (“if only one did not have to be afraid of one thing: that instead of having a dictatorship of the aristocracy, we might now get a dictatorship of the proletariat”). But most of all Hans is his conversation partner in all cultural matters until the early 1920s. An interesting book is hardly finished or a theater performance ended before Kurt informs his brother: Georg Hermann’s style is “pure music,” Else Lasker-Schuler, on the other hand, “exaggerates for the most part, rarely leaving a favorable impression,” while Romain Rolland fills the 18-year-old with enthusiasm. “The most valuable information, however, concerns Weill’s musical “socialization,” to be found especially in the early letters. We learn a great deal about the aspiring composer’s musical studies and his lessons with Albert Bing where he “digs” into Bach chorales and conducts Fidelio; we are surprised by Weill’s enthusiasm for Pfitzner. The young Weill eagerly seizes every opportunity to attend a concert or an opera performance, first in his hometown Dessau and later in Berlin, always reporting to his brother. Over and above all the assorted influences, one can detect the roots of Weill’s later aesthetics when in November 1917 he discusses the Dutch composer Jan Willem Frans Brandts Buys’s opera Die Schneider von Schönau, praising the “orchestra’s marvelous adaptation to the varying degrees of intensity as well as to the action on stage, but never becoming mere musical background to the characters’ thoughts.”

From a sociocultural perspective, the most significant document is a letter to his mother, written on New Year’s Eve 1924. Here are revealed the experiences of a young German raised as a Jew, who now as an adult has fallen away from religious institutions but has not called his personal belief into question. Up to this point we have learned many details about the life of a German-Jewish family in the early years of the 20th century; in subsequent letters we rarely hear Weill mention religious issues at all. Only when his parents settle in Palestine do the letters—often written in English for fear of wartime censorship—touch on specific Jewish matters, but these issues are fundamentally political, not religious.

Numerous examples could be cited which would demonstrate the invaluable significance of the family correspondence; for instance, many letters illuminate the history of specific compositions. But when all is said and done, I must raise one strong objection, which is directed more toward the publisher than the editors. The importance of the family correspondence for Weill scholarship and beyond is evident. In the years and decades to come this source will be consulted again and again. Hence the poor quality of the printing is inexplicable. The facsimiles of Weill’s autograph music examples are barely readable because the low resolution causes an unsightly screen. In general, the illustrations are amateurishly reproduced. The cheap binding ensures the book’s rapid transformation into a loose-leaf edition (the decision to publish the first edition in paperback can only cause us to shake our heads). Regrettably, only two facsimiles of Weill’s handwriting are given (a letter on the dust jacket and one postcard, from 7 March 1918); a few more samples of Weill’s changing handwriting might have been of interest not only to specialists. These flaws, however, should not detract from the great achievement of the editorial team Symonette/Juchem, whose edition of Weill’s letters to his family represents an important scholarly contribution—and not only to Weill research.

Christian Kuhnt
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Books

Kurt Weill, ou la conquête des masses

Pascal Huynh

ISBN: 2-7427-2612-8

Certain environments lend themselves particularly well to reading certain books. The smoky bustle of a Montreal café seemed to create a more than suitable backdrop for exploring Pascal Huynh’s recent study of Kurt Weill’s life and works, which appeared in France in 2000, just in time for Weill’s centenary. Lulled by the steady rhythm of the thick spring rain and comforting smell of roasting coffee, it was hard to resist Huynh’s invitation to indulge in a book that would not provide an “exhaustive biography” or “systematic analysis of Weill’s work,” but rather “paint the most faithful portrait of one of the most controversial composers of the twentieth century,” by “emphasizing the most notable events [of his life] and key works” (p. [9]). Written in a fluid, welcoming, essayistic style, and opening uncharacteristically with a quote by Léo Ferré, Huynh’s study seemed to promise hours of pleasurable reading, a treasury of insights, commentaries, and anecdotes, and a kaleidoscope of unexpected perspectives on Weill by one of the most knowledgeable experts on the subject. I looked forward to a wonderful afternoon.

At least a third of the way into the first section of Huynh’s book, I realized that the hint of the first pages had been somewhat deceiving. Rather than extended literary reflections, Huynh has provided here a fairly standard “life and works,” in the tradition of his early mentor Jurgen Schebera, aimed not at Weill experts or specialists on the Weimar Republic, but rather at a broad French public, which is now provided with the first substantial biography of the composer in their language. Unlike Schebera and other biographers, however, Huynh divides his biography into three relatively equal sections reflecting the German, French, and American periods in Weill’s life, thereby giving welcome, rare emphasis to Weill’s connection to France. In each section he proceeds similarly: after indicating key events in Weill’s life, general cultural debates relevant to his work, and important political background, he dwells on extensively descriptions, rather than analyses, of musical works, reinforcing the impression that his book is intended for those who are not yet familiar with Kurt Weill. One very quickly recognizes that Huynh, like Schebera, is a master of the difficult art of writing a popular biography directed at a broad public. He evinces the same remarkable ability to draw together historical, personal, and composition-al facts into a lucid narrative that communicates in one vast, general sweep the cultural, musical, stylistic, and biographical context of Weill’s major works. Such talent is rare, and one cannot help but admire his achievement.

The general public will very much enjoy Huynh’s virtuosic account of Weill’s life and works. The musicologist or Weill specialist may be somewhat disappointed, however. Those who have read the numerous biographies available in English and German will find the terrain Huynh covers to be familiar, and will perhaps be saddened that he has not provided more personal, critical interpretations of Weill’s music, subtler historical perspectives on the era in which he lived, more biographical detail, and greater reflection on the recent scholarly literature. Instead, one is confronted frequently, especially in the German and American sections of the book, with general statements, standard accounts, and stories so rooted in the Weill mythology that many people no longer ask whether they are true. He repeats the myth about Busoni calling Weill a “Verdi of the poor” (p. 73), refers to Stravinsky’s compositions as “minimalist” (p. 79), and defines Neu Sachlichkeit vaguely as a “reduction of means” and “rejection of pathos” (p. 81). He also emphasizes the importance of “dance rhythms” in general in Weill’s work without exploring specific rhythms (pp. 88, 90, 106), repeatedly uses the problematic word “kitsch” (pp. 107, 113, 129) and speaks of the popular song style of Tin Pan Alley without defining it further (p. 311). The specialist may also wonder why Huynh has chosen to quote Weill and others throughout the first section from rare, original sources (without indicating the names of French translators), rather than from better-known, accessible recent editions. Or why he inconsistently uses French or original German sources for Ernst Bloch, Brecht and Adorno (pp. 86, 93, 96 passim) and why quotations are sometimes left without any source whatsoever (pp. 173, 259). It may seem rather picky to worry about footnotes, yet their inconsistencies intruded frequently on my reading pleasure, indicating that the author still vacillated curiously, albeit only in hidden corners, between a scholarly and popular style.

Most curious for those who know Weill’s life and work, however, are Huynh’s narrative descriptions of his compositions, which consistently summarize prominent keys, intervals, rhythmic textures, dynamics, and general musical styles, and which he applies to widely varied types of music, from Weill’s Symphony No. 1 to Lady in the Dark. Although much of Weill’s music is understandable primarily in its interaction with words, and although Weill’s creative output relied on interaction with gifted writers, Huynh describes his music, and even individual numbers, almost without reference to the texts. Reduced in Huynh’s descriptions to absolute music, songs such as “Seerauberjenny,” for example, become simple classical forms, seemingly interchangeable with thousands of other compositions:

The first part of the song proceeds in two parts: a breathless progression around the interval of a minor third and culminating in a double statement, vocalized and spoken with a suspenseful, sforzando punctuation. The second part supports the two pivot notes, B natural and F sharp, which form the interval of the final fifth. The last five measures, “broadly” unfurling, expose large leaps of the sixth and fifth. Musically identical, the two first strophes lead to a final one that takes the form of a slow march (Meno mosso) in which the danger becomes noticeably greater. The instruments, piano, punctuate the dramatic evolution that culminates in a final moment of nakedness, brought to life by a triangle (originally cymbals) and the spoken responses over the image of the severed head. Rarely has a piece had such a powerful cadential effect (p. 112).

Here and elsewhere in Part One of his book, Huynh necessarily finds himself resorting to familiar descriptions of gestures, epic theater, and Weill’s famous irony, which he can hardly interpret without the texts. Sadly, in spite the excitement and sincerity of Huynh’s account, his descriptions of intervals, harmonics, dynamics and instrumentation fail to communicate the meaning of Weill’s music. For example, here, we miss the power of Brecht’s fantastic
text; Weill’s brilliant, complex, and disputable musical interpretation of it; and Lotte Lenya’s spectacular performance of it in Pabst’s film. Huynh’s descriptions reminded me how little scores help sometimes in understanding the effect of Kurt Weill. Nevertheless, given the consistency with which Huynh applies this descriptive methodology to Weill’s works, I had to assume that he inherited it from a cultural or musicological tradition of compositional biography with which I am unfamiliar. Its goal seemed to be to indicate general stylistic trends in Weill’s music for the purpose of broad categorization.

Huynh approaches musical description and historical biography similarly throughout the three sections of his book, albeit with varying effect. The minute one turns the page into the second section on “Paris,” for example, one feels suddenly transported, plunged into the romanticized, nostalgic world of the French Weill, skillfully brought to life by Huynh through a newspaper account of Weill’s shadowy figure disappearing into the fog of the Gare du Nord (p. 179). Huynh is in his element here, his text brimming over with ideas, connections, and anecdotes. The reception history and cultural context no longer seemed familiar, but rather strikingly original. I had never thought about the connections between Mahagonny and Jules Romains’s Donogoo (p. 190); the relationship between Pabst’s L’Opéra de quat’seuls, Antonin Artaud, Weill, Fantômas, and Alejo Carpentier (p. 192); Weill’s address book and its importance in determining the course of his career in France (pp. 203–05); the extent of French anti-Semitism and its effects on Weill and other émigrés; French interpreters of Weill (pp. 276–81); Weill’s influence on post-war French cabaret (pp. 284–88); or about the complex political and cultural reasons for Weill’s mixed reception in France. The numerous original reviews and commentaries are particularly valuable in bringing to life Weill’s frequently neglected French years.

After the richness of Part Two, the last section of Huynh’s book feels almost like an epilogue. Although his approach to Weill’s American years is unusually fair, it remains somewhat distanced, perhaps because Huynh attempts here to pack fifteen years of constant compositional productivity into little more space than he had just given two years of exile in France. He includes significantly less reception history and cultural context, and begins to rush his descriptions of musical works, especially in the case of One Touch of Venus, The Firebrand of Florence, and Love Life (pp. 361–74). Huynh does not explain the imbalance between the different parts of his book, and one tends to want to forgive him for it, given the enormous sympathy he holds for all of Weill’s oeuvre. Nevertheless, I could not help thinking that this is not the biography to use for a seminar on Weill’s American works. In the appendices that end his book, Huynh includes a work list, chronology, discography and bibliography.

On the whole, Pascal Huynh’s biography is a valuable achievement. In spite of its inconsistencies and similarity with existing biographies in other languages, it does provide enough new impulses, especially in the section on France, to make it very much worth reading. As the rain stopped and I packed the book away, I was able to leave the Montreal café content, looking forward to future, more interpretive and specialized studies by Pascal Huynh, who I believe has an enormous amount to offer all those interested in Kurt Weill.

Tamara Levitz
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Performances

Four Walt Whitman Songs

The Hampson Project
Salzburg Festival

30 July 2001

The press release for the first in Thomas Hampson’s eponymous series of four concerts (subtitled “I Hear America Singing”) with Dennis Russell Davies’ Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra quotes the baritone as drawing his inspiration from “a culture chiseled out of a fierce independence of mind and heart and soul forever grounded in the very myriad of racial histories from which it hearkens [sic].” With Salzburg as its venue, a town where variations on the dirndl remain the ne plus ultra of haute couture, Hampson’s project is perhaps as misplaced as some of the words in the press release, which one hopes is a translation of his words back into English from one made into German. A puzzled audience in the sauna-like Felsenreitschule began flipping through its programs when the singer and conductor appeared in front of the set for Janácek’s Jenůfa still occupying the stage, and the evening commenced not with the announced opener, Copland’s Fanfare for the Common Man, but with a declaration of Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing.” Hampson sat down at the initial percussive assault of the Copland and half the audience jumped out of its seats. So disconcerted were they by the Fanfare that its conclusion was met with stone cold silence.

Hampson then rose to give a revised edition of Weill’s Walt Whitman settings its premiere. The order of the songs, all four of which are now available for baritone, had been thoughtfully altered to match a 1947 recording, bracketing the interior narratives “Oh Captain! My Captain!” and “Come Up from the Fields, Father” with the martial “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and “Dirge for Two Veterans.” Regrettably, Hampson buried his head in the score, depriving these gorgeous melodies and mordant narratives of his considerable interpretative powers. Davies was of little help, employing inappropriately fast tempi and allowing the brass to cover the vocalist completely in the tutti passages of “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and “Dirge for Two Veterans.” In the two less intense middle numbers, illumination of the texts and observation of dynamic markings were sparse at best. Sorely missed was any attempt to match the orchestra’s urgency in the reading of the letter and the mother’s intuition of her son’s death in “Come Up from the Fields, Father.” When it could be heard, Hampson’s customary rich, well-produced voice appeared in good condition. “The Song of the Lark,” which is now available for baritone, had been thoughtfully altered to match a 1947 recording, bracketing the interior narratives “Oh Captain! My Captain!” and “Come Up from the Fields, Father.” When it could be heard, Hampson’s customary rich, well-produced voice appeared in good condition, although attempts to sustain pianissimo head tones throughout the song cycle shattered.

Returning to the stage after performances of Karl Amadeus Hartmann’s Sinfonia tragic a and Ives’ Three Places in New England, Hampson comforted his decidedly perplexed listeners with straightforward renditions of seven numbers from Copland’s Old American Songs. Contending with lighter orchestration than in the Weill and physically freed up by having these folk tunes memorized, Hampson was finally able to demonstrate just how much he can convey with a simple gesture, a decrescendo into falso, the coloring of a single word, or an added snap of his fingers. One eagerly anticipates the occasion when he is equally familiar and at home with Weill’s Whitman songs.

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Performances

Die sieben Todsünden

Dessau Kurt-Weill-Fest

8–10 March 2001

Ever since its renovation, Dessau’s gothic Marienkirche has served as a concert hall, but the building’s ecclesiastical atmosphere still comes through strongly. Thus no venue seemed better suited for a performance of Die sieben Todsünden at the Kurt-Weill-Fest in Dessau: Brecht takes up medieval theology’s register of sins and updates it; Weill’s music lends an ironic sacred tone to No. 4 (“Gluttony”), the ballet’s centerpiece. Andreas Auerbach’s sparse set in the chancel emphasized the unornamented architecture of the church. What came to mind was the thesis of German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) that capitalism grew out of the spirit of the Protestant ethic.

Even before the concert, director and choreographer Dietmar Seyffert’s decision to cast the double role of Anna with two men, the soprano Jörg Waschinski and the dancer Gregor Seyffert, had stirred up trouble. The director tried to counter charges that the aim of this “queer version” was pure sensationalism: men playing women was a tradition in the kind of Asian theater which always fascinated Brecht; in the original version the role of the mother in the quartet is scored as a bass. In particular, “Weill’s intended artificiality, defamiliarization, and elevated treatment of the material represented” is achieved by this means.

The performance demonstrated that these arguments were not simply the evasive defenses so popular in program notes. It turned out to be rather less obtrusive than the usual stagings, perhaps because there was no danger of seeing Anna as one of Weill’s many Jenny characters (from Dreigroschenoper, Mahagonny, or Lady in the Dark). The first scene captivated instantly: Anna II, the passionate and emotional self, playfully peeled off the cloak shared with Anna I, the disciplined, rational self. Gregor Seyffert’s playful attempts to escape then changed gradually into desperate efforts. Waschinski’s articulate singing of the original key version—not unlike the Evangelist’s voice in a Passion setting—gave the superego Anna I, deformed by capitalism, a rather eerie absolute and unapproachable quality; on the other hand, the singer’s dance-like flexibility made it possible for him to follow sensitively the impulses of his alter ego.

To be sure, there were grotesque and comic moments, like the dancer turning his back to the audience and presenting his gray dress and then orange underwear at the cue, “Now she shows off her little round white bottom.” On the whole, however, a moving and quite frightening parable of the breaking of a human being to the service of profit emerged. The religious fervor displayed by the Atrium Quartett as the family while singing the passage “There’s no market for hippos in Philadelphia!” was as entertaining as it was profound. The Berlin-based vocal quartet (Sebastian Lipp, Klaus-Martin Bregott, Martin Schubach, Frank Schwenmer), acting intelligently as individual characters, also interacted superbly on the musical level with homogeneous sound and alert interpretation.

Regrettably, a few crucial passages of the “family” were overshadowed by the busy choreography for Anna I and II. Especially in comparison to the evening’s second work, a setting of Bertolt Brecht’s Lesebuch für Städtebewohner (Reader for City-Dwellers) by the Berlin composer Friedrich Schenker, it became apparent just how clearly Weill’s music speaks for itself, not requiring any reinforcement from stage business. Schenker, on the other hand, in a rare case of compositional restraint, subordinated his music to the pre-existing choreography of Dietmar Seyffert, even incorporating the movements of the three actors on stage into his score. The director’s wish that the actors’ bodies produce “their own sounds, tensions, rhythms, and metric” became thoroughly palpable. Weill, however, would probably not have gone along with relegating the music to a subservient and largely illustrative role.

In spite of its musical retreat, the work, commissioned for this year’s Kurt-Weill-Fest, made a lasting impression which—to be fair—benefited primarily from the intense, sometimes breathtaking performances by Julia Jentsch, Victor Calero, and Boris Wagner of the Berlin Hochschule für Schauspielenkunst “Ernst Busch.” In ever-shifting combinations, they developed a disturbing performance about isolation and aggression under the sign of unrestrained capitalism. It was not far at all from the reality outside, particularly in this region of Germany, where the crisis of transition after the end of the socialist regime is still very visible.

Placing the orchestra behind the stage seemed appropriate for Schenker; in Weill’s case it was not unsatisfying acoustically. But the Kammersymphonie Berlin under the direction of Jürgen Bruns performed the score of Die sieben Todsünden with too much weight and solemnity; the witty and dry passages of Weill’s music (as in No. 3, “Wrath,” which Weill borrowed from the “Bananentanz” in Der Silbersee) suffered the most. The evening’s punch line, however, came across. At the ironic C major triad which closes the epilogue, the family and Anna gather for a family picture, the kind on display in every camera shop in Germany: they are grinning into the camera, proud of their achievement! Yet daughter Anna is broken, without having quite realized it.

Andreas Hauff
Mainz

Jörg Waschinski (Anna I) and Gregor Seyffert (Anna II) enact the fifth deadly sin, Lechery. Photo: Jens Schlüter
Performances

Der Kuhhandel

Hagen, Germany
Theater Hagen

Premiere: 19 May 2001

So Kurt Weill has now returned to the place where he started his professional career as a theater man in 1919. Well, not exactly to Lüdenscheid, which offered him his first job as an operetta Kapellmeister, but to Hagen, just around the corner, only twenty-six kilometers away, where the municipal theater embarked on Germany’s third production of his operetta Der Kuhhandel. As in Dessau last year, the intendant was responsible for the production—in the German theater, intendants’ productions command more money and resources than those of lesser directors. Whereas Johannes Felsenstein in Dessau flopped because of his overzealous political ambitions, his colleague Rainer Friedemann in Hagen failed for the opposite reason: his production was absolutely devoid of any stimulating ideas. In fact the occasional smile and even applause was provoked by the contributions of the designer Hartmut Krügener: the gaudy colors of the Henri Rousseau-ish Caribbean island paradise, the lavish and quite sexy costumes, and the appearance and antics of the cow with its sorrowful eyes. But the intendant’s decision to place supers in the audience, who leaped from their seats and waved their little flags while joining the actors in their hymns of praise for the President of Santa Maria, caused only embarrassment—failing miserably to stimulate the spectators to participate in the jolly goings-on.

Actually, I wondered whether Friedemann, maybe as a firm believer in historical performance practice, might have been aiming at a reconstruction of what an operetta in Lüdenscheid must have looked like in 1919—but, then again, they could never have afforded such a sumptuous staging in the aftermath of the first world war. However, his direction of the singers and the chorus (reinforced by an additional chorus) was terribly clumsy; “provincial” seems rather too flattering a word to describe the routine arrangements and poses he had them adopt in front of the footlights. It all added up to one of the most depressing and long-winded evenings of theater I have encountered in several seasons. The dialogue especially seemed endless and monotonous, in desperate need of pruning. The production robbed the work of all its satirical sting, ruining any chance for effective social or political criticism.

Nor did the musical realization of Weill’s saucy score compensate for the lack of punch and drive on the stage. On opening night, conductor Arn Goerke had to make do with an ersatz band of musicians because the Hagen Philharmonic in Hagen failed for the opposite reason: his production was absolutely devoid of any stimulating ideas. In fact the occasional smile and even applause was provoked by the contributions of the designer Hartmut Krügener: the gaudy colors of the Henri Rousseau-ish Caribbean island paradise, the lavish and quite sexy costumes, and the appearance and antics of the cow with its sorrowful eyes. But the intendant’s decision to place supers in the audience, who leaped from their seats and waved their little flags while joining the actors in their hymns of praise for the President of Santa Maria, caused only embarrassment—failing miserably to stimulate the spectators to participate in the jolly goings-on.

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One cannot blame the singers, though. They were a competent flock, with attractive, youthful, strong voices, not without some charm, even sex appeal in the cases of pretty Magdalena Bränland (Juanita) and the dashing Volker Thies (Juan). As the blustering General, Stefan Adam offered a much more subtle performance than his colleague in the 1990 Capriccio recording under Latham-König. The others were quite decent, including Jürgen Dittebrand as the somewhat timid pacifist President, Richard van Gemert as the servile opportunist Felipe Chao, and Edeltraud Kwiatkowski as the voluptuous Madame Odette. They all would have fit right into an American summer-stock performance. Actually, that was what the Hagen production looked like: a stock performance at the end of the summer season.

And yet, and yet... Time and again I stirred, moving uncomfortably in my seat, tapping my feet, trying in vain to control my hands, which automatically started to conduct. So infectious and intoxicating are Weill’s tunes, so delectable his melodies, so piquant his sparkling rhythms, so bittersweet their harmonic crust that all my critical armor melted away—just like the non-working weapons supplied by the Waterkeyn Armaments Corporation of Cleveland. How long, O Lord, how long must we wait for the savior who will substantiate Josef Heinzelmann’s daring claim in Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters: Der Kuhhandel is “simply the best operetta written in the twentieth century?”

Horst Koegler
Stuttgart
Performances

Street Scene

Minneapolis Minnesota Opera

Premiere: 24 February 2001

While writing the scores to successful Broadway musicals such as Lady in the Dark and One Touch of Venus, Kurt Weill dreamed of composing an American opera on a truly American subject and making use of the Broadway idiom of which he had become a master.

He did it with Street Scene, which opened on Broadway in 1947, a work based on the Elmer Rice play of the same name that won a Pulitzer Prize in 1929. Though the opera isn’t as political as Rice’s play, Weill and his collaborators, the poet Langston Hughes and Rice himself, retained the play’s essential story of life in a New York tenement between one evening and the next afternoon with the intertwining plot threads of thwarted young love, loneliness and an unhappy marriage that leads to murder. The reviews called the show “Broadway’s first real opera.” Olin Downes of the New York Times described Street Scene as “the most important step toward significantly American opera” that he had yet encountered. Weill thought Street Scene his best work for the stage and hoped that it would live on. The puzzle is why we don’t know the work better than we do, why it isn’t performed regularly by those opera companies that can muster the considerable resources the work requires, why Weill’s subtle and abundant score isn’t by now part of our shared musical heritage.

Maybe that’s soon to change. The Chicago Lyric Opera will present Street Scene in the fall of 2001, and, before that, a production of the work by Minnesota Opera, which played for two weeks in February at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, with its strong cast and persuasive staging, certainly made a strong case for the work. No one who saw it was likely to argue with the composer’s high estimation of his own creation. Staged by Michael Ehrman and conducted by Rob Fisher, the production was created originally for the Houston Grand Opera in 1994 and then played briefly in Berlin.

To be sure, there were a few bumps in the road on opening night. Fisher displayed an aptly expansive feeling for the romance in Weill’s music, and the rich orchestration of the work was given ample expression, but up-tempo numbers like “Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed” could have swung a little more. And not all the dialogue could be understood, though with the lyrics projected above the stage, we were helped out during the musical numbers. (One wonders what Weill would have thought of surtitles giving the English text of a performance in English to an English-speaking audience. The best response: Broadway theaters were—and are—relatively small, and audiences of 1947, unlike those of today, knew how to listen.)

On the brighter side was Adrienne Lobel’s amazingly detailed set, a tenement that rose as far as the eye could see. The set was so realistic one expected Ralph and Alice Kramden to walk out onto the front stoop during a fight. (“One of these days, Alice . . . Pow! Zoom!”) The set almost became a character in the show: a prison of the tortured Frank, whose growing anger masks his fear of a changing world. Jill Slyter overdid her high-pitched, squeaky Adelaide-Vivian Blaine-Gays and Dolls voice, especially since her singing voice is at least an octave lower. But the character was engaging, nonetheless, and Slyter’s big dance number with the nimble Tony Vierling, “Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed,” nearly stopped the show on opening night.

Ehrman’s staging struck the right realistic tone throughout, only moving toward stylization in numbers like the “Ice Cream Sextet,” Weill’s clever opera parody. Moreover, Ehrman’s cast delivered the needed ensemble feeling. They all looked as if they had been neighbors for a long time. Kathleen Humphrey (Mrs. Jones), Emil Herrera (Henry) and Charlie Corbo (Willie) were stand-outs. Gail Bakkom’s costumes gave us an assured 1940s look.

Jenny Hildebrand (Adriana Zabala) celebrates her graduation with friends and neighbors in Wrapped in a Ribbon and Tied in a Bow. Photo: Gary Mortenson
Performances

Street Scene

Chicago
Lyric Opera

Premiere: 2 October 2001

Kurt Weill had high hopes for his Street Scene ushering in a revitalized American opera that might achieve the kind of artistic and commercial success on these shores that his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht had found in Germany before he was forced to flee the Nazi onslaught. It did not quite turn out that way, although his operatic version of Elmer Rice’s play, with lyrics by Langston Hughes, had a run of 148 performances following its 1947 Broadway opening—disappointing for a musical but not bad for a new opera.

One of Weill’s best and most eclectic stage pieces, Street Scene requires the resources of a major opera house to bring its diverse elements to life. That diversity mirrors, in a way, the multi-ethnic tenement in 1940s New York where the tuneful plot takes place.

The terrific production of Street Scene the Lyric Opera of Chicago presented for the first time reminded one how sturdily Weill’s depiction of melting-pot America in its time—the 1920s in Rice’s play, the 1940s in his—has held up. Urban malaise has not changed much in 54 years, even if the stakes have gotten higher and deadlier.

The opera’s central characters—the lonely, disillusioned Anna Maurrant (Catherine Malfitano), trapped in a terrible marriage to a bullying lout, and herdaughter Rose (Lori Ann Fuller)—represent two generations of quiet desperation. The older woman hopes against hope there will be a brighter day tomorrow. The younger woman finally realizes that the only way to find a better life is to run away from her depressing surroundings and give up Sam Kaplan (Gregory Turay), the shy young man who adores her.

The apparent paradox of Street Scene, of course, is that surrounding this thin slice of American verismo are elements—ballad, swing, jitterbug and blues—borrowed from American popular music of the ’40s. Perhaps only Weill, an emigré composer who straddled two musical worlds, could have blended the serious and the frivolous in a way that doesn’t feel forced.

Director David Pountney, restaging his acclaimed production from the English National and Scottish Operas, fused the show’s arias, duets, dance numbers and dialogues into a seamless musical and dramatic whole. To move nearly seventy singers and actors, a pack of cute kids, and one adorable dog around the stage so naturally was no small feat. Gritty naturalism and snazzy theatricality coexisted happily. Discreet amplification was used; even at that, not all of the spoken words emerged clearly.

At least designer David Fielding’s brownstone tenement and period-perfect costumes looked believably lived-in, while the neighborhood denizens were sketched in telling dramatic strokes. In a nifty postmodern touch, lighting designer Paul Pyant threw chill yellow light on frozen figures in a ruined next-door building during Sam’s wistful aria, “Lonely House.”

Richard Buckley’s conducting was a mixed bag. On one hand, he conducted with keen attention to the opera’s showbiz roots as well as its bittersweet romanticism. On the other, his fussy insistence on subdividing every single beat tended to straight-jacket the hard-working orchestra musicians and slowed the pace at those moments when the tempo needed to move.

Choreographer Nicola Bowie stopped the show with those irresistible song-and-dance numbers—the “Ice Cream Sextet” and “Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed,” sensationally danced by Stephanie Ann Sheppard and Kirby Ward against a dazzling Manhattan nightscape.

The sensitive Anna Maurrant is worlds removed from the cynical floozy Malfitano played in Lyric’s 1998 Mahagonny, but it is a wisely chosen role for her at this stage of her career, and she made the audience feel intense sympathy for the unhappy housewife who only wanted to be loved. Fuller, making her Lyric debut as Rose Maurrant, has a clear, sweet soprano, and she made “What Good Would the Moon Be?” a touching study in the young woman’s conflicting emotions.

Turay brought a sympathetic manner to the bookish Sam, but too often his smooth lyric tenor strained at vocal lines that lay beyond the most effective part of his range. Dean Peterson did what he could with the brutish Frank Maurrant, a onedimensional role in both the play and opera. The choicest characterizations among the supporting singers came from Timothy Nolen as the suavely lecherous Harry Easter and Judith Christin as the tenement’s ace busybody and gossip, Emma Jones. David Cangelosi as Daniel Buchanan, Dorothy Byrne as Olga Olsen, Anthony Mee as Lippo Fiorentino and Philip Kraus as Abraham Kaplan likewise turned in memorable cameos.

John von Rhein
Chicago

John von Rhein is the music critic for the Chicago Tribune.
Recordings

Marie Galante / Davy Crockett

Joy Bogen, soprano
Orchestra of St. Luke’s
Victor C. Symonette, conductor
Thomas Hrynkiw, piano

Koch-Schwann 3-6592-2

The latest addition to Koch-Schwann’s mixed-blessing catalogue of Weill recordings (this is the label which gave us the Four Walt Whitman Songs performed by a baritone with only a passing acquaintance with English) professes to be the “world premiere” recordings of “highlights” from Marie Galante and Davy Crockett.

After Johnny Johnson and the long-delayed premiere of The Eternal Road, Weill spent the first two months of 1938 working on some songs for a Davy Crockett project with playwright Hoffman Reynolds Hays in the dying days of the Federal Theatre Project. When a long hoped-for collaboration with Maxwell Anderson materialized, Weill scooted to Rockland County to pen the score for Knickerbocker Holiday, leaving the Davy Crockett music labeled “incomplete; for rehearsal purposes only.” The five numbers delivered here to piano accompaniment (two of them in arrangements by Lys Symonette and Victor C. Symonette) suggest that they should have remained in their box in the Yale Music Library, honoring the composer’s instructions.

Hays’ texts are, quite simply, utterly unsingable. With ungainly lyrics like “Blood of your own kind binds you surely,” and the necessity of setting a sustained note on the word “soil,” this narrative prose negates any chance of melodic development. On the rare occasions when rhymes are volunteered, they are puerile (“clock” is set against “tick tock”). Weill even sinks to the stereotypical “Injun” background drum beats (on the first, third, and fourth beats of a four-four measure) used for several decades in grade B Westerns and arcane rituals of the Cub Scouts.

Even though he managed something approaching a nice tune in the closing vocalise to the “Hillbilly Narrative,” an echo of the Americana employed in Johnny Johnson in “The Death of Josh Hawkins,” and a hint of “Je ne t’aime pas” in “Time Is Standing Still” (described in the liner notes as “a typical Weill soprano solo”), you can tell Weill’s heart was never in this project.

As for the Marie Galante Suite, we have all heard the five songs sung better and in more interesting interpretations by the likes of Stratas and Lemper, and the orchestral music played with more dash by HK Gruber as the “Suite Panaméenne” on his Berlin im Licht album (Largo 5114). The only music new to us, a whopping six minutes’ worth, comes in the form of an Introduction drawn largely from “Les filles de Bordeaux” and an Intermezzo derived from the “Youkali” tango. (The Gruber disc must again be cited for offering an alternate fanfare of an Introduction and a totally new Tango, fleshed out by the conductor from Weill’s sketches.)

Joy Bogen, credited as the executive producer of this album, delivers the songs in a hollow, nasal cabaret voice, abruptly switching gears to a forced, unsupported operatic vocal production. The Marie Galante songs are devoid of both humor and urgency. The Davy Crockett songs are strident and mannered. Under Victor Symonette’s direction, the usually excellent St. Luke’s Orchestra is merely competent in the Marie Galante Suite, missing the spark and drive in these giddy dance band tunes and sultry tangos. Thomas Hrynkiw knocks out the uninspired piano accompaniment to the Davy Crockett fragments.

Yet again, Koch-Schwann gives us a maddening CD booklet with a full fifty percent of Patrick O’Connor’s notes devoted to a Weill biography, no credit for who concocted this Marie Galante Suite (the numbers are not given in the order in which they appear in the play), contestable matters of opinion (“the biggest hit song of his career” is here awarded to “September Song”), generalizations (“she became her only student” with respect to Ms. Bogen and Lenya), and contradictions with other sources (is Marie befriended by a Japanese man or an old black man?). While the chorus and percussionist in the Davy Crockett songs remain anonymous, credit is given to Roger Fernay, who wrote the lyrics to the alternate vocal version of “Youkali” which is not even included on this recording. With sentences such as “The ‘Hillbilly narrative’ song runs [sic] throughout the play,” and paragraphs which begin in one language and end in another, there appears to have been no budget for an editor (or, for that matter, an art director: Quick, name two other Weill albums with the Statue of Liberty on the cover). Billed as “Joy Bogen sings Kurt Weill” on the back of the CD booklet, “Highlights from the musicals Marie Galante & Davy Crockett” on its label, and “Songs and Melodies from Marie Galante & Davy Crockett” on its spine, this album can’t even make up its mind what it wants to be called.

Larry L. Lash
New York City
Recordings

Life, Love and Laughter: Dance Arrangements, 1927–50

[RCA Red Seal 09026-63513-2]

RCA recently released this unique Weill compilation, devoid of original-cast performances, studio reconstructions, or the likes of Miles Davis’ “My Ship” or Bobby Darin’s “Mack the Knife.” Instead, what’s promised—and delivered—are faithful renditions of the published “vintage” dance-band arrangements that were an important component in popularizing Weill’s melodies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Gruber has sympathetically shaped each recording captured here, leading excellent musicians who are fully attuned to the styles they’re emulating. The section playing is consistently tight, with just-right tone quality and vibrato served up by the reeds and brass—as well as the Palast Orchester’s violinist, whose portamento is employed judiciously and lovingly. The disciplined rhythm section plays well both for dancing (steady and crisp) and recording (sparse, with a minimum of “fills”); the banjo and tuba of the 1920s selections are replaced by guitar and string bass for the later arrangements. This CD brings to mind the Pasadena Roof Orchestra, a British outfit which, beginning in the 1970s, has resurrected authentic playing (and singing) of 1920s–30s dance band tunes from the U.S. But the Palast Orchester musicians can stand the comparison, both for their technical polish and their nuanced attention to details of performance practice.

Max Raabe, who recently appeared on H K Gruber’s Die Dreigroschenoper (also for RCA), is heard on eight selections. He sings both in English and German, with a crisp, light baritone (and some artful falseto) that’s especially appropriate for the earlier songs. Whatever his aim, Raabe’s delivery of the later numbers is not convincing—American; for me, however, his appearance as the sole vocalist adds a welcome unity to the collection.

Each arrangement heard here was authorized by Weill, according to Gruber. In the U.S., at least, it was common for songwriters’ publishing contracts to permit issuing of “stock” dance-band arrangements and other such market exploitation, and so one wonders if “authorized” carries the same meaning here as “approved.” That said, I’d guess Weill to have been pleased with these arrangements. The European items retain more of the instrumentation and “feel” of Weill’s originals. If, however, the American scores are more “generic” in their conforming to publishing practice of their time, the most essential features of each song shine through—uncluttered presentations of Weill’s melodies, with harmonies and even bass lines preserved to an encouraging degree. Though America’s “name” big bands in the 1930s and 1940s each attempted, via their arrangers, to create an instantly identifiable “sound,” the resulting liberties and elaborations didn’t always please the period’s songwriters. We can be grateful to “stock” arrangers like Jack Mason who, while writing scores adaptable to varied or incomplete instrumentation, let more of a composer’s creation speak for itself.


Schebera, author of Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Life (Yale Univ. Press, 1995), ably surveys the musical ferment that spawned the European Weill’s theater music, with due attention to commercial matters—the recording and publishing activities of the day. Hamm, whose scholarship has embraced seemingly every aspect of music in the U.S., provides much detail on the conventions of “stock” dance-band arranging during the second phase of Weill’s career, along with each song’s role in its parent production. Schebera and Hamm have augmented the value of this recording both substantially and engagingly.

The U.S. release’s liner notes are exclusively in English, except for the lyrics for Raabe’s vocal numbers, given also in German. The translations aren’t necessarily “singable”—they don’t always match their source in rhyme, accent, and syllable count—but they nonetheless convey nicely the sense of each lyric.

The recorded sound, without drawing attention to itself, is clean and transparent. Granted, it uses more “spot” microphones and processing than were common when these songs were new, but the aural perspective is not compromised. The mix is likewise free from the distraction of instrumental solos and vocals pushed too far “forward.”

Gruber presents the CD’s nineteen tracks not in chronological sequence but “according to purely musical and largely associative criteria.” I was at first skeptical, but repeated hearings have swayed me to his view. The American scores benefit especially, allowing the listener to focus on the arrangers’ departures from “formula”—the Dixieland-ish clarinet-trumpet-trombone trio in “Green-up Time” and the melody briefly at the bottom of the harmonized saxophones in the title song, to name but two. (Those intent upon faithful chronology may program their CD players to a track sequence something like this: 8–12–18–19–2–13–14–11–9–16–1–5–15–4–10–17–6–3–7.)

A product of fine oversight, musicianship, and scholarship, Life, Love and Laughter is indeed “charming”—both artistically first-rate and unlike any previous recorded compilation of Weill’s music.

George J. Ferencz
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
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<td>$225.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New York residents, please add 8.25% sales tax.

Postage and Handling: $3.50 per item (USA, Canada), $7.00 elsewhere.

**TOTAL AMOUNT**

Detach and mail with payment to: Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 7 East 20th Street, New York, NY 10003-1106.