

Kurt Weill

Volume 22

Number 2

Fall 2004

Newsletter

Der Kuhhandel



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Volume 22

Number 2

Fall 2004

ISSN 0899-6407

© 2004 Kurt Weill Foundation for Music

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Published twice a year, the Kurt Weill Newsletter features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 5,000 copies, the Newsletter is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for inclusion in future issues.

A variety of opinions are expressed in the Newsletter; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

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Cover photo: Map of the nations of Ucqua and Santa Maria from the original production of *Der Kuhhandel* (as *A Kingdom for a Cow*), London, 1935.



The two versions of the map of Uccua and Santa Maria: act I (top) and act II (bottom), designed by Duncan Hayler, from the Bregenz production of *Der Kuhhandel*.



Note from the Editor

“There’s much more to it than merely writing an acceptable waltz,” Weill told his brother Hans in May 1919 about the difficulty of composing operetta. He added that he doubted he was up to the challenge. The context for this remark was the fresh impression of a performance of Emmerich Kálmán’s *Faschingsfee*, which Weill considered a significant operetta by the “Gypsy Princess manufacturer,” *musically*, at least. The modifier was telling: Like many of his contemporaries, Weill loathed the empty, stereotypical plots of 1920s operettas all set in the same Ruritania under different names.

When Weill composed his first operetta fifteen years later, he made sure the libretto had some heft. While *Der Kuhhandel* is set on an exotic island, the fictitious nations of Uccua and Santa Maria bore a clear resemblance to Haiti and the Dominican Republic (with its infamous dictator Rafael Trujillo). Other plot elements and characters satirized events in fascist Europe. But the work was never finalized as Weill intended, and the English-language adaptation, *A Kingdom for a Cow*, failed miserably in 1935.

This summer, Austria’s Bregenz Festival mounted a production of *Der Kuhhandel* that seems to have vindicated Weill’s belief in this particular work. This issue of the Newsletter reviews all of the Bregenz productions, which included the rarely performed one-act operas *Der Protagonist* and *Royal Palace* (staged together for the first time). The feature article focuses on the situation of operetta in the late 1920s and early 1930s, exploring the background of the first of Weill’s two ventures in this genre.

Letters

Leo Treitler’s book review of Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny, 1933–1945, eds. Michael H. Kater and Albrecht Riethmüller (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2003), published in the previous issue of the Newsletter, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 2004), drew the following response:

Amid various gratuitous and predictable swipes at me in his review of *Music and Nazism* (a book to which I am not a contributor), Leo Treitler lodges a complaint at some “broader, more inclusive polemic against musical modernism” hinted at by the title of an article (“The Dark Side of Modern Music”) that I published in *The New Republic* some sixteen years ago. It was indeed an important article, containing as it did the first news of so many aspects of twentieth-century music that inform everybody’s consciousness today, including Mr. Treitler’s. But as anyone knows who has any experience with such things, the title (like virtually all titles in newspapers and general-interest magazines) was imposed on the piece by the editors. Was this really a gaffe? Or was it a considered tactic in some broad, inclusive polemic of Mr. Treitler’s own?

RICHARD TARUSKIN
Berkeley

BREGENZ

Der Protagonist / Royal Palace

By Horst Kogler, Stuttgart

After twenty successful years, in which he elevated Bregenz to one of the leading festivals in Europe, general manager Alfred Wopmann has stepped down. Now David Pountney has taken over. In one of his first statements, he declared, “Weill is a symbol of the Bregenz Festival . . . his career inscribed an arc from the Berlin avant-garde of the 1920s to Broadway. His music is intelligent and popular—just as our programming strives to be.” European Weill fans started wondering: will he venture a production of *Mahagonny* or *Street Scene* on the vast floating lake stage for an audience of up to 7000 people, while perhaps reserving the indoor setting of the Festspielhaus for *Die Bürgschaft*?

He made a brave beginning by opening the 2004 festival on 21 July with a double bill of *Der Protagonist* and *Royal Palace* at the Festspielhaus (1680 seats)—a pairing that Weill had envisioned when he composed the latter work, but which had never been realized before. Rarely performed, *Der Protagonist* has usually been presented with other Weill works, such as *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren* and *Die sieben Todsünden* at Frankfurt in 1960. In 1990, Theater Oberhausen initially scheduled the Weill “Trittico” of *Der Protagonist*, *Royal Palace*, and *Zar*, but then had to cut back for internal reasons and canceled *Protagonist*.

We might wish that Pountney had the courage to present all three in chronological order—and thus compete directly with Puccini, which would certainly be possible; the recording of *Der Protagonist* runs 66 minutes, *Royal Palace* in Bregenz took 45, and *Zar* on CD lasts 46 minutes. What a fabulous finale *Zar* would make, an opera buffa as appealing as *Gianni Schicchi*; the “Tango Angèle” is every bit as catchy as Puccini’s “O mio babbino caro”!

But even reduced to diptych size, the pairing of *Der Protagonist* and *Royal Palace* provided a fascinating experience—not only demonstrating Weill’s enormous artistic progress during his formative years between 1924 and 1927, but also in purely theatrical terms, with the bleak and tragic ending of *Protagonist* followed by the surrealist effusions of *Royal Palace*. It marks his development from a stern and conscientiously anti-romantic adherent of the Busoni camp to the liberated and self-aware purveyor of a polystylistic brand all his own. On hearing *Der Protagonist*, I was continually reminded of Hindemith, especially his *Cardillac*, also from 1926 (think of those extended pantomimes!). But when I heard *Royal Palace* for the first time, after nearly sixty years of going to the opera, I was amazed to discern precursors of Alfred Schnittke’s polystylistic practices.

In Nicolas Brieger’s production (sets by Raimund Bauer, costumes by Margit Koppendorfer), *Protagonist* proceeded rather laboriously, due to Brieger’s decision to add a twist to Georg Kaiser’s already rather pompous libretto. Just a couple of measures into the boisterous

overture, a stagehand interrupted the music to announce that one of the singers would be unable to perform. Then he tried to soothe the audience by telling some rather fatiguing jokes, before retreating so that the Vienna Symphony, conducted by Yakov Kreizberg, could start all over again. Brieger disrupted the action time and again for such improvisations—unfortunately, the lines generally could not be understood (one defect of the performance was the singers’ generally poor articulation).

The multiple interruptions were defensible as an elaboration of the opera’s plot: an Elizabethan troupe of strolling players whose director cannot distinguish illusion and reality during a rehearsal, so he stabs his sister, with whom he apparently has an incestuous relationship, when she appears with a new lover. Obviously, Brieger wanted to emphasize the ambiguity of the plot with its blurring of reality and illusion, but the result was a certain long-windedness. For the two pantomimes, the first one in jolly commedia dell’arte mood, the second as its tragic reflection, the stage band of eight wind players added the necessary spice to the orchestra—and thus a welcome acidity to the general sound, which Kreizberg kept rather low-caloried: Weill lite instead of the richness one expects from this pulsating and energetic score, so representative of Berlin’s “roaring twenties.” With the assistance of choreographer Thomas Stache, Brieger presented such uninhibited acts of fornication in the pantomimes that some prudish visitors left in protest.

Another of Brieger’s unwelcome additions was the projection of close-ups of the performers’ faces on video screens, as if from a silent film. Otherwise, there were no direct references to the twenties on the stage, which was scattered with some rows of beat-up theater seats, intended to reinforce the importance of the act of rehearsing to the plot. It all added up to a rather muddled affair, encouraging audience members to close their eyes and concentrate on the music’s crisp and ebullient fervor. The music gained in power as the performance went on, though I found Kreizberg’s approach too restrained throughout.

The music, with its unstoppable motoric drive, finally triumphed, and the singers battled the orchestra valiantly, although few of their words came through. As the *Protagonist*, Gerhard Siegel exhibited his burnished character-tenor at full blast, while Catherine Naglestad unflinchingly scaled the soprano heights as his



Dramatic finale: The Protagonist (Gerhard Siegel) has murdered his Sister (Catherine Naglestad).
Photo: Karl Forster



In *Royal Palace*, the Husband (Otto Katzameier) tries to win Dejanira (Catherine Naglestad) with a promise of a trip around the globe. Photo: Karl Forster

sister (and namesake Catherine). Perhaps the most pleasing vocal contribution was Peter Bording's mellifluous lyric baritone in the role of the Young Gentleman. Roland Bracht sounded appropriately gruff as the Innkeeper and Erik Årman appealingly foppish as the Duke's majordomo (doubtless a distant relative of his colleague in *Ariadne auf Naxos*).

After the grim and stern atmosphere of *Der Protagonist*, what a relief to return after intermission to the phantasmagoria of *Royal Palace*! From Georg Kaiser's expressionist prose to Iwan Goll's absurd flights of fancy, from the dusty surroundings of an empty theater to the glittering elegance of a luxury hotel overlooking an Italian lake at sunset—and thus from Weill *sec* to Weill with his hair down. The entirely different music, with its unabashed sensuality and its brilliant display of instrumental and vocal colors, explodes like a rocket, propelling us into a never-never land, which, due to the extensive use of mirrors in the set, seems to be suspended in mid-air. Working with Torge Møller and Momme Hinrichs for the video sequences, with Rezac handling the projections, Bauer and Koppendorfer conjure up a fantasy world, peopled by Brieger and Stache with creatures that resemble specters rather than women and men of flesh and blood, though they are in desperate pursuit of the very earthly pleasures of love and lust.

Even more rarely performed than *Der Protagonist*, *Royal Palace* (no recording existed until this summer) centers on the elegant and sexy Dejanira, object of desire for three men: her present Husband, Yesterday's Lover and the Future Admirer. In addition, there are the Young and the Old Fisherman who prophesy her impending death. The three suitors conjure up their individual visions of wealth, erotic longing, and eternal voluptuousness—all the things she has tired of. She feels that her innermost longings are being ignored, so she decides to abandon the world by disappearing into the water, transforming herself into an elemental creature to the sounds of a never ending tango—a very different sort of *Liebestod* for a very different Lulu.

The original score of *Royal Palace* disappeared after a 1929 performance in Essen. Its present performing version is the work of Gunther Schuller and Noam Sheriff, who reconstructed it by orchestrating the surviving piano reduction from 1926—a fact not mentioned in the Bregenz program, strangely enough. They have done a brilliant job, and Kreizberg and his musicians mix an intoxicating cocktail of sounds, seasoned with titillating spices borrowed from jazz as well as popular music and dance music of the era. It goes straight to the head, creating a kaleidoscopic effect—a feast of uninhibited sensuality.

The producers have invented an almost cinematic succession of pictures in which reality and fantasy blend into each other. The set is a suspended space between mirrors and glittering transparent sheet of foil, where the actors serve as projection screens, handling objects which are beamed onto their bodies; a fabulous ballet of gliding waiters serving food made of light from plates that don't exist—and yet we see them. It's a bewitching multimedia spectacle of sound, light, color, shapes, and movements of dazzling variety taking off and floating freely in the cosmos. It's Las Vegas transported to the shores of Lake Constance. Amazing, even spellbinding. I am sure that Goll, as the literary inventor of a surrealism all his own, and Weill, always open to new devices and techniques, would have loved it.

Again I regretted being able to make out so little of the hilariously absurd texts, like the Husband's introduction of Dejanira: "The lady eats only roasted stars, rubies in milk, and rose ice cream—right, Mausi?" But the sensuality with which they are articulated is truly mind-boggling. The singers perform as if mesmerized: Catherine Naglestad as Dejanira oozing an irresistible whiff of sexiness (try to imagine her as Lulu crossed with a mermaid), Otto Katzameier as her possessive Husband, Peter Bording, conjuring up the pleasures they have enjoyed so thoroughly in the past, Gerhard Siegel as the tempter who tries to woo her with promises of unimaginable future debaucheries, plus Erik Årman and Roland Bracht as the Young and Old Fisherman and Rosita Kekyllite as the off-stage solo soprano, accompanied by an otherworldly women's chorus (the female contingent of the Moscow Chamber Chorus). What a fascinating escapist centerpiece it would make, sandwiched between the cold and forbidding *Protagonist* and the farcical and bubbly *Zar*!

BREGENZ

Der Kuhhandel

By Larry L. Lash, Vienna

Considering that Kurt Weill has now been dead longer than he was alive, it is amazing how many of his works have yet to receive adequate recordings and successful, professional stagings and/or contemporary revivals.

As far as I can tell, *Johnny Johnson* didn't get a universally acclaimed production until 1986 (in Los Angeles), and—although finally recorded—we are still waiting for *Der Silbersee*, *The Firebrand of Florence*, *Lady in the Dark*, and oh so many others.

One major wrong has been righted with Bregenz's splendid, witty, topical production of *Der Kuhhandel* by festival Intendant David Pountney. This show has legs: it moves to Leeds' Opera North in spring 2006, before settling in at Vienna's Volksoper. Make your travel plans now.

If fingers are to be pointed for yet another oversight in the Weill canon, let's point them in the usual directions. Of the half-dozen attempts to bring *Der Kuhhandel* to life since 1990 (five in Germany, plus a three-and-a-half-hour wet firecracker at the Juilliard School in 2000), the biggest complaints have been about the book—its length, as well as its quality. For this production, Reinhard Palm has whittled down Robert Vambery's endless text to a length which is not only manageable but convivial. Palm streamlines things to make a tight, compelling narrative, occasionally dropping the extraneous baggage of a couple of characters (President Mendez's son, Bimbi; the Bailiff).

Further, Capriccio's stingy 1992 CD of "excerpts" does the work no favors by omitting more than it includes. These snippets are less than representative of the whole show and fail to achieve any semblance of theatrical cohesion. So rich is the musical content of this operetta, and so superb the performances at Bregenz, that revelation followed revelation, even for one familiar with the Capriccio disc.

As with many other great composers, you can make a fairly accurate stab at the date of a particular Weill composition by comparing it against other more famous works, and *Der Kuhhandel* could have only been a product of the early 1930s.

While the orchestral textures and melodies of *Der Silbersee* and *Happy End* are often conjured, *Der Kuhhandel* contains a number of tunes which were destined to appear more than once in Weill's works. The overture not only has the feel of the military numbers in *Johnny Johnson*, it contains yet another quotation of the "Youkali" tango (which shows up in *Johnny* as "Song of the Goddess"); "Mon Ami, My Friend" quotes the opening chorus of the peoples of Santa Maria and Ucqua; General Garcia Conchaz's drinking song would fit very nicely into *Johnny*'s Act One sequence of soldier songs. Juan's punishingly high song, "Seit ich in diese Stadt gekommen bin," shows that the seeds for "September Song" were planted well before *Knickerbocker Holiday*. Juan's second aria, "Ich habe eine Kuh gehabt"—in which he laments that he used to have a cow but now he has a gun—presages the Brechtian bite of "Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?" The bluster of *Die Dreigroschenoper* is recalled in the General's opening declamation,



Juan (Alexander Kaimbacher) and Juanita (Nataliya Kovalova). Photo: Karl Forster

"Schockschwerenot!" and in the Bailiff's song, "Triffst du mich abends" (here assigned to Minister of Information Ximinez). The overall feel of the work places it firmly in the same family as *Die sieben Todsünden*, the last full-length work completed by Weill before *Der Kuhhandel*, particularly in its orchestration (all those bitersweet reeds playing in parallel thirds).

With raucous cancons, overripe waltzes, lilting hymns, boisterous marches, and a quicksilver patter terzettino, Weill gives a delicious, broad-but-loving nod to Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauß, Jr. (it will be interesting to see how Weill's operetta plays in Vienna, where critics lambasted a recent series of "European Operettas"—including *The Pirates of Penzance*, a piece by Mascagni, and a zarzuela by Amadeo Vives—presented by the Volksoper's previous regime over doubts about the works' legitimacy). The music is toe-tappingly infectious, building to finales of incredibly intertwined harmonies that clearly show the work as *hommage* rather than parody.

Pountney and his co-conspirators Duncan Hayler (set and costume design) and Craig Revel Horwood (choreography) have created a zany entertainment, filled with pungent satire and rowdy, raunchy humor which begins even before you enter the theater (audience members in evening dress lined up to be photographed with live cows in the parking lot).

As called for in the libretto, the first sight is a giant map of the Caribbean island which comprises the countries of Santa Maria and Ucqua, but its outline looks rather more like a naked woman. The chorus of countrymen is outfitted in the German/Austrian folk dress called *Trachten* (dirndls for the women, lederhosen for the men). When nationalities are switched, it is accomplished by a change of hat, color-coded to the map.

Juan and Juanita barely manage to disguise their sex-play amid a fanciful set of palm trees and the sun and steam of a rain forest, economically suggested by tropical-print fabrics hung over clotheslines. When they sing of catching fish, Juanita gestures suggestively to Juan's crotch. But sure enough, he reaches in his pants and, to his surprise, pulls out a fish, gently reminding us of the youths' innocence.

Cradled in a sofa suspended high above the stage for the entire first act, Santa Maria's President Mendez literally sleeps through the arms deal conducted by his cabinet members and the loud-mouthed, white-suited American, Leslie Jones, which sends Santa Maria to war. The presidential palace is a shambles of a rotunda

outfitted for maximum slapstick effect: a duet of broken-down revolving doors, and ramshackle furniture not cleaned since the invention of dust.

When Ximenez comes to take possession of Juan's cow (a life-size model complete with swirling flies circling her rump), she objects by releasing a stream of urine on the officious tax collector.

In the big "Pharaoh" number, punctuated by the foot-stomping of a chorus of a dozen shirtless men, the crates which are hauled onstage are revealed to contain WMDs.

In the big party scene in which a *coup d'état* is enacted, male guests wear traditional feathered *Trachten* dress hats, but instead of feathers, they are adorned with multi-colored dust brushes. A wacked-out variation of the traditional Alpine folk dance in which hands and thighs (and in this case, a few other body parts) are slapped is offered as entertainment. During the President's speech, Ximenez inserts pre-recorded applause with a remote device. In a not-too-implausible misplacement of priorities, Garcia Conchaz is more concerned with a parade of military might than with the actual destination of his troops. The WMDs flicker with different colors to provide mood lighting for dancing, and the flag is reconfigured in the shape of a clenched fist rising from a jackboot.

The scene in Madame Odette's whorehouse is introduced by a bevy of prostitutes of various sexes and sexualities crawling over and making lewd gestures at the audience (and a good time was had by all). Scant hot pink costumes were accessorized by cow patterns and prosthetic breasts. When the whores are lulled to sleep, they do so with their legs in the air.

Seen as a gun-belted soldier, Juan's uniform features a cow headband and backpack. Jones and the whores do a kick-line as he sings a patter song about the power of money.

Things become increasingly fantastic as a chorus of veterans enters in cow-patterned Arabic turbans leaning on canes which double as rifles. Juan is about to be blasted into smithereens by shoulder-mounted missile launchers when—click!—the weapons are revealed to be duds. Jones is airlifted out of this potentially nasty situation, calling up to his pilot, "Auf nach Baghdad!" Peace—if not security—reigns, and Juan and Juanita are united and (finally!) given a cow to call their own.

For an event that is barely a blip on the screen of big summer international music festivals (something like 98 percent of its audiences come from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, in that order), the Bregenz Festival manages consistently to attract world-class talent, and the cast and orchestra are to be lauded as much as Pountney for the production's success.

Nataliya Kovalova, the Juanita, has such a perfectly-produced, creamy, light soprano that you want to listen to her forever. There is a touch of Stratas's commitment and abandon, but Kovalova's tone is richer. She has a sensual bloom redolent of Kiri Te Kanawa in her prime, and the fact that she is pretty, thin, and tremendously sexy doesn't hurt.

Every bit her match, Alexander

Kaibacher as Juan has the endearing, wide-eyed qualities of a shaggy, disoriented puppy. His sweet tenor is clean, light, and plangent: one can easily imagine him singing Mozart. Moving from goofy innocence in his initial playful scenes with Juanita—two kids in love on a steamy, tropical island—Kaibacher poured on the testosterone as Juan progresses from sweaty, muscular laborer to Rambo-esque sharpshooter.

Before reading the cast's names and biographies, I was positive that the singer portraying Leslie Jones, Johannes Martin Kränzle, had to be American: no one else could mangle the spoken German text so perfectly (or Spanish for that matter: he consistently pronounced the Minister of Information's name as "JIM-en-eh"). But Kränzle is, indeed, an Augsburg native possessing a huge, firm, virile baritone. He hit so many stereotypical Americanisms dead on target (not only through flawless inflection, but in physical mannerisms) that it verged on embarrassing.

A Kammersänger for more than a quarter of a century, Rolf Haunstein still possesses a blustery basso, and sang the hell out of General Garcia Conchaz's big numbers. Christoph Homberger lent a touch of Old World operetta tradition to President Mendez with his well-worn, woolly character tenor. Roberto Gionfriddo was an appropriately astringent, slimy Ximenez. Hubert Bischof (as Emilio Sanchez and the Minister of Ucqua) and Vera Schweiger (as Juan's Mother and Madame Odette) provided solid veteran support.

Versatile Christoph Eberle seems to be all over Austria, leading ballet performances at the Wiener Staatsoper, and serving as chief conductor of the Wiener Kammerorchester and the Salzburger Landestheater. He also helms Bregenz's Symphonieorchester Vorarlberg, the excellent pit band for this occasion. Eberle found the right approach to this operetta, a mixture gentle as well as vicious, capturing the giddiness of all the rides in Weill's stylistic carnival. The acoustics of the Theater am Kornmarkt, formerly a nineteenth-century grain warehouse, proved generous and affable.

The opening night audience simply exploded at the final curtain, showing as much joy in the discovery of the work as in the performances and production. Post-performance conversations suggested that a recording would be made at a later date.



Every bit her match, Alexander The grand finale. Photo: Karl Forster

BREGENZ

Zaubernacht

By Horst Kogler, Stuttgart

Kurt Weill's *Zaubernacht* (*Magic Night*), his theatrical opus 1, has so far enjoyed (?) a rather checkered career. At its 1922 premiere in Berlin, it had a scenario by Wladimir Boritsch, a man totally lost to dance history. A reconstruction from the surviving piano score was undertaken by Meirion Bowen, who detailed his transcription and orchestration in the booklet accompanying the 2002 Capriccio recording under Celso Antunes with the Ensemble Contrasts Köln and with Ingrid Schmithüsen as soprano soloist. Two years earlier, a concert performance with the same artists had been choreographed by Jochen Ulrich and executed by three dancers from the former Tanz-Forum Köln. Both local papers reviewed the performance which, in the words of the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, relied heavily on makeshift "playing with infantile sexual fantasies," while the *Kölnische Rundschau* mentioned "androgynous figures executing a wild and ecstatic dance, emphasizing the grotesque and fantastic and making no sense." The German professional dance publications, though, ignored the event. Next came a staging at the Dessau Kurt Weill Fest of last year, a mixture of pantomime, commedia dell'arte and black-light theater, directed by the Slovak mime Milan Sládek for a single late-night performance in a Dessau church, which was repeated in Dusseldorf two days later.

And so to the two performances on August 6 and 7 at the Bregenz Festival! They could have been billed as the true *Uraufführung* of Weill's *Zaubernacht* by a professional dance troupe. This was the abdancecompany of St. Pölten, capital of Lower Austria near Vienna. It is a ballet company of twelve dancers with a modern bent (somewhat modeled upon the Netherlands Dance Theater though not yet of comparable artistic caliber). Nicolas Musin is the artistic director and chief choreographer. The performance was rather courageously announced—as was the original in 1922—as a "Ballettpantomime" (a term most choreographers of today would shrink from); it lasted just under an hour at the Werkstattbühne, where it was favorably received by the audience.

In 1922 "Ballettpantomime" was still a widely used term in the wake of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, applied to Josef Bayer's popular *Puppenfee* as well as to Richard Strauss's *Josefslegende* and Rossini/Respighi's *La Boutique fantasque*. Though it was termed "Fantaisie lyrique," Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* also falls into this category. Actually *Zaubernacht*, *Puppenfee*, *Boutique fantasque* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges* all share a similar fairy-tale story in which the dreams of children come alive at night. In his version, however, Musin does not follow the scenario suggested by David Drew—children who dream of concrete fairy-tale characters like Hansel and Gretel, Andersen's Tin Soldier and The Witch—but replaces them with fictional characters from his own imagination, as in a cartoon. He employs two dominant characters named the Parents (Georgette Sanchez and Guido Verwer) and two Children (Monica Cervantes and Karl Schreiner), with the remaining seven dancers figuring as Dolls. They all dance barefoot in colorful and funny costumes designed by Musin himself—with the music blar-

ing from loudspeakers (it is the Capriccio recording, with the singer's voice sounding like squeaky chalk on a blackboard).

It starts on an empty stage with a suspended horizontal beam, on which coat hangers are fastened with puppet-like figures attached to them. They gradually come to life, specimens in Musin's human zoo, adults and children of no special character but representing all sorts of follies, playing their games of innocence and vice, wishes and frustrations, strengths and weaknesses, desires and disappointments. Musin stages them as short sketches with no connecting dramaturgy but as a rather loose chain of individual scenes, with the music providing only the driving force; its power to illustrate the characters remains unused. It is all very musical, but with no attempt to give the single numbers any individuality of their own. There are few props, but he does make ample use of coat-hangers, integrating them thoroughly into his choreography. The only other prop which he exploits constantly are white masks to hide the true identities of the players.

His choreographic style draws on a mixture of heavily mime-influenced gestures and steps derived from ballet and modern dance—a farcical and grotesque combination. It reminded me of cabaret dance of the 1920s as it was performed by Valeska Gert and Lotte Goslar in Weimar Berlin, but peppered with balletic steps and devoid of Gert's acid cynicism or Goslar's heartwarming humor. In Weill's music, simply made for dancing, I heard the ringing pre-echoes of *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*. To my ear, the music conjured the hard-edged grotesqueries of George Grosz rather than with the soft-porn foibles of Musin's fantasies.

I would have preferred that an entirely new libretto had been written to suit these very individual numbers of Weill—difficult as this might have been. And I have the feeling that Musin, though he clearly admired the score, would have preferred some other, more abstract, concert music by Weill. And he has stated quite openly that he originally wanted the music to be performed live, as he had some reservations about certain numbers as recorded on the Capriccio disc. Maybe that was why he interpolated—without permission—two rather hip-hop-sounding pieces by Coco Rosie and J. C. Musin (a relative?), which clashed hideously with Weill's beautifully spare and astringent (yet melodic and often distinctly saucy) music. I must admit, though, that this episode, with a storm of soap-bubbles unleashed, whirling around the stage like a tornado, created a magic all its own.

Thus it all resulted in a highly entertaining and varied show, occasionally even quite humorous, and it certainly made me admire even more Weill's enormous range as a twenty-something composer. At the same time, I couldn't help wishing for a choreographic interpretation more in keeping with the lean angularity and propulsive drive already so unmistakable even in this very early score.



Photo: andereart

Weill, the “Operettenkrise,” and the Offenbach Renaissance

by Joel Galand

Kurt Weill often invoked the “in-between genre” (*Zwischen-Gattung*). The expression typically appears when he is proposing a solution to an *Opernkrise* that beset Germany following the 1929 crash. The crisis was partly financial; Hans Heinsheimer, describing the situation for an American journal, wrote of “German Music on the Breadline.”¹ In so far as the financial crisis arose from the necessity of providing huge state subsidies for productions that enjoyed only a limited following, however, the crisis also bore on ethical-aesthetic dilemmas that preoccupied Weill throughout his career. He had this to say about the *Opernkrise*:

[It] consists of the problem that works which can draw a specialized operatic audience (Wagner, Strauss) demand an extraordinarily large production, but on the other hand this specialized audience is not numerous or lucrative enough to be able to cover the costs of production. Therefore, constant subsidies are necessary, which in today’s crisis exceed the resources of the financial backer in most cases. In order to eliminate the economic crisis of opera, it would be necessary to reach a wider public.²

The aesthetic horn of the dilemma lay in how to realize the ethical goal of accommodating this wider public without capitulating entirely to what Weill regarded as crass commercialism.

As a negative example, Weill cited *Im weissen Rössl*, a 1930 operetta for which Ralph Benatzky, Robert Stolz, Bruno Granichstädten, and Robert Gilbert contributed music. Originally staged by Erik Charell as a *Revue-Operette* for Berlin’s Grosse Schauspielhaus, this colossal hit had been adopted by several opera houses to shore up their finances, a practice Weill deplored. He hoped that the Benatzky confection would not prove the model for what he so ardently sought: an “artistic form that concerns everyone and is suitable to generate broader interest”:

I am enough of an optimist to assume that we in Germany today have not yet come to a cultural situation so barbaric as to replace opera—always a significant component of German culture—with the most superficial type of theater. (543)

Transcending a stylistic variety that has encouraged critical bromides about two Weills, the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical—what Stephen Hinton has termed a “dualist aesthetic”—would be a constant throughout his European and American careers.³ On the one hand, he worked “consistently and without making concessions, in the face of opposition from the snobs and aesthetes, at creating prototypes [*Urformen*] of a new, popular musical theater.”⁴ He deplored those who, “full of contempt for the public, work behind closed doors at the solution of aesthetic problems.”⁵ On the other hand he would lament that “just in those circles where music was really needed . . . second-rate material was used almost exclusively.”⁶ Composers could not create music “capable of satisfying the musical needs of broader levels of the population without giving up artistic substance”⁷ by imitating *Im weissen Rössl*.

Weill’s constant striving for a delicate balance between aesthetic integrity and social relevance goes far in explaining why his theater works are usually *sui generis*. “In-between genres” permitted Weill to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of esoteric high modernism on one side and industrialized *Kleinkunst* on the other. Perhaps his clearest formulation of the “in-between” was one he proposed to the Group Theatre not long after arriving in America:

The more that serious music wanders into esoteric regions where very few can follow, the more is light music despised. It is completely forgotten that, in the time of Mozart, such a distinction scarcely existed and that the light muse has produced such geniuses as Offenbach, Sullivan, and Johann Strauß. I consider it one of the most important realizations of recent years that the distinction between good and bad music has replaced the distinction of light and serious, and that good light music is appreciated as being more valuable than bad serious music.

The musical theater as it exists today consists on the one hand of the opera completely isolated from drama and on the other hand of musical comedy, which is to say a handful of topical events surrounding a group of hit songs. Without contesting the right to existence of both of these veins, since both have their audiences, it can be said that a re-establishment of the true musical theater is scheduled to take place inside of the enormous territory between the two genres; it has been ripe for a long time.⁸

Given Weill’s reference to Offenbach, Sullivan, and Strauß, one might expect that operetta, itself a *Zwischengattung*, would have been an appropriate vehicle for realizing his ambitions. Yet only twice did Weill compose one, both times with disappointing results. Weill was unable to complete either *Der Kuhhandel* (1935) or *The Firebrand of Florence* (1945) in the form he had originally envisaged. Both were commercial failures, despite scattered critical praise. If Weill couched his avoidance of certain operatic traditions as a response to the *Opernkrise*, his reluctance to work directly in the field of operetta, despite his admiration for certain classics of the genre, is symptomatic of a parallel *Operettenkrise*, a nexus of socio-aesthetic criticism intimately linked in turn with a contemporaneous Offenbach renaissance.

What was this *Operettenkrise*? We can turn again to Heinsheimer, specifically his 1928 article “Gestaltwandel der Operette?”⁹ He begins journalistically by reporting the departure from Vienna of Hubert Marischka, director of the Theater an der Wien, and the subsequent conversion of that venerable house into a venue for spoken theater. After listing other houses that have closed or been converted, Heinsheimer diagnoses the underlying condition: traditional operetta is “played out.” The final blow was dealt, paradoxically enough, by the recent successes of *Gräfin Maritza* (1924) and *Der Orlow* (1925). The former was a relatively late contribution by Emmerich Kálmán to the “Hungarian operetta,” whose prototype was Strauß’s *Der Zigeunerbaron*. The latter, by Bruno Granich-

städten, was widely considered the first Viennese *Jazzoperette*. To Heinsheimer, these seemingly vast differences must have been superficial; he blamed them equally for helping to perpetuate a closed—and closed-minded—clique of librettists, composers, directors, publishers, and idea men whose only goal was to build upon these financial coups by closely adhering to the formulas they had established:

The Philosopher's Stone has apparently been found. . . . Operetta recipe is turning into operetta routine. The limit of what counts as "useful" operetta is being measured by the successful examples, right down to fixing exactly the length of the (three, of course) acts. With similarly inexorable precision, the character, number, and length of the musical numbers conform ever more steadily to the norm. After so many pages, the comic duet, the dance duet, the Diva's entrance song, the dance insert; the same rules apply to the music itself. The numbers of measures, the tonal plan, the instrumentation all submit to the unremitting censorship of narrowness. We are tempted to recall the rules of the Nuremberg Meistersingers. To the same extent, the dramatic roles congeal into the dreariest clichés: Diva–Tenor, Soubrette–Juvenile, comic roles—two or three older male comics and, in the hands of the really extravagant visionaries, a comic old lady. Also frozen is the unfolding of every plot: the inevitable tragic second-act finale, the inevitable false paths, the inevitable ordinary lady's man with shattered ideals. (257)

Heinsheimer especially reproaches the operetta manufacturers for their "perverse" ignorance of the present. Even in operettas with contemporary settings—Heinsheimer cites Kálmán's *The Duchess from Chicago* (1928)—the superficial topical allusions avoid any burning questions of the day. (In all fairness, Kálmán's librettists, Julius Brammer and Alfred Grünwald, did inject a modicum of social criticism in one bit of dialogue involving the secondary pair. The soubrette, an aristocrat, apologizes for having a birth defect, a little lisp, whereupon her partner reassures her: "Ich habe nämlich auch einen kleinen Geburtsfehler. Ich bin nämlich ein little Israelittle.")

Heinsheimer concludes that the "complete commercialization of the art form is leading rapidly to its dissolution," hence the loss of so many operetta houses. Yet not all is lost; Heinsheimer finds hope in a "strange and stirring development": "The intolerable division between serious and light art, which to the new social order is becoming ever more nonsensical, is at last starting to disappear." He cites the collaborations between Hindemith and the revue poet Marcellus Schiffer on *Neues vom Tage* (1929) and between Weill and Brecht on *Mahagonny*, the latter being a "relaxed play [*gelöstes Spiel*] full of hits created completely from the spirit of the present and its burning problems."

Of course Heinsheimer, head of the opera division at Universal-Edition, was writing for *Anbruch*, its house journal. His essay prefaces reviews by Herbert Jhering and Oskar Bie of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, one of the firm's publications. He also introduces critical threads that *Anbruch* would take up a few months later in a special issue devoted to light music [vol. 11/3 (1929)]. Weill scholars will recognize two often-cited selections from that issue: Weill's "Notiz zum Jazz," and Ernst Bloch's "Lied der Seeräuber-Jenny." Also included were articles on operetta, revue, film and radio music, and hit song by Adorno, Krenek, Herbert Graf, Hans Redlich, Ernst Schoen, Paul Stefan, Frank Warschauer, and Marek Weber. A second contribution by Krenek, "Karl Kraus and

Offenbach," reminds us that the ideas put forth in *Anbruch* had a currency beyond the immediate context of providing aesthetic validation for some of Universal's publications.

For it was Kraus who inaugurated a dominant mode of operetta reception among German intellectuals, adumbrating several of the themes that recur in the *Anbruch* essays and others of their tenor. Their gist might be summarized as follows: The history of operetta is that of a rapid rise to a *point de la perfection* represented by Offenbach's topical, satirical *opéra-bouffes*, followed by a steep decline into a vacuous sentimentality from which not even Strauß's operettas are entirely exempt. Attempts to update the genre by incorporating revue and jazz elements have so far failed because these remain cosmetic attempts at masking an underlying standardization. Only recently are there signs that the operetta genre might be revitalized, and these are to be found in works like *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*.

Indeed, when faced with *Die Dreigroschenoper*, that *Zwischengattung par excellence*, critics interpreted it against the backdrop of operetta conventions. Adorno wrote of the "exaltation of operetta." Oskar Bie thought it "a model of modern operetta as it should be"; its producer Ernst Aufricht, a "comical literary operetta"; Elias Canetti, an "unadulterated operetta."¹⁰ Weill himself spoke of a "revolution within the operetta industry" (Weill to Universal, 10 September 1928). When called upon to predict "the future of operetta," Paul Stefan had this to say:

What Bert Brecht and Kurt Weill have accomplished in between play, opera, and revue in *Mahagonny* and *Dreigroschenoper* amounts to a genre in itself, one out of which works of similar high rank and powerful contemporary significance could erupt [*eruptiv hinaus-schleudern*]. It seems to me that it is in this kind of intellectual area [*Geistesprovinz*] that the future of operetta lies, if one there be.¹¹

Kraus's relevance to the rhetoric of the *Operettenkrise* lies especially in his validation of Offenbach over his Central European epigones. Between 1925 and 1933 Kraus launched a one-man Offenbach renaissance, translating fourteen librettos to which he added *Zeitstrophen* satirizing current events (much as Brecht, to Weill's chagrin, did for *Dreigroschenoper*). Kraus included Offenbach in the *Theater der Dichtung*, his famous public readings of works by himself and others. Kraus would sing the musical passages in his untrained but curiously expressive voice with the sole aid of an accompanist. On one occasion the accompanist was Weill; the evening included a partial recitation of *Mahagonny*. Kraus's *retouche* of *La Périchole* was staged at Klemperer's Krolloper in 1931 and published by Universal.

As he explained in a 1909 essay, "Grimassen über Kultur und Bühne," Kraus admired Offenbach's ability to cast spectators into an irrational world where the combination of action and singing actually seemed normal. At the same time, the chaos of the operetta stage presented the audience a mirror image of its own absurd situation:

If the relaxing effect of the music unites with an irresponsible gaiety that allows us to glimpse in this chaos a picture of our real follies, then the operetta proves to be the only dramatic form in complete harmony with the potentialities of the theater. (*Die Fackel* 270/1:8)

Kraus deemed Offenbach's second-empire satires relevant beyond the specific conditions that inspired them. He traced the genre's decline into "Salon-Operette" as far back as *Die Fledermaus*. It is

not merely that the Offenbachian barbs had been blunted, or the operetta world domesticated. Still worse, a reality principle had set in: the genre was becoming rationalized and psychologized. This trend accelerated in the works of Lehár and others of his generation. The naturalistic approach made the incongruity of drama and song all too glaring:

Absurdity on the stage, seriously taken, thoroughly suits the life philosophy of a society that has acquired reason in its old age and thereby reveals its feeble-mindedness for the first time. (12)

What had once been inspired nonsense was now treated earnestly and realistically, yielding over-inflated works that burst from the pressure of their internal contradictions—in short, kitsch. In a later essay, “Offenbach-Renaissance” (1927), Kraus praised Offenbach’s power to dematerialize—his *Kraft der Entstofflichung*—a faculty he found wanting in the current climate (*Die Fackel* 757: 38). That essay found an almost immediate echo in Ernst Bloch’s revue of Lehár’s *Friederike*:

Certainly a Goethe operetta could be rendered in the style of Offenbach and thus serve as a bit of disenchantment against the subservient gaze (as well as the overblown mythos) that has come to surround the classics. But apart from Offenbach and occasionally Johann Strauß, the operetta is the reserve of false pathos, sweetness, sentimentality, and melted margarine.¹²

Kraus adumbrated the surrealist interpretation of Offenbach, whose *La Belle Hélène* André Breton celebrated as “the masterpiece.” In light of his likely influence on Weill, it is worth noting that Kraus’s anti-realist, anti-psychologistic view of operetta resonates with the composer’s aesthetics: Weill’s emphasis on the non-illustrative functions of music, his appeal to the generalized *Gestus* over the interior monologue, and his delineation of anti-realistic features in epic opera.¹³

Kraus’s Offenbach recitations tapered off after Hitler became chancellor. Shortly before his death in 1936, he proposed that:

Since there is Hitler, Offenbach . . . is no longer possible, because what is happening under Hitler’s rule . . . strangulates laughter just as it chokes our breath. But the addition of everyday folly that is not rendered speechless when confronted by the unspeakable would, by its lesser stature, only make the great void more painfully evident.¹⁴

Kraus’s view of operetta, however, would live on to become a *lingua franca* in its own right. It had an enormous—and acknowledged—influence on Siegfried Kracauer’s analysis of Offenbach’s life and works against the socio-economic background of Louis Napoleon’s dictatorship. In *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* (1937), the first edition of which Weill owned, Offenbach appears as something of a revolutionary, whose goal was “to dissipate groundless fears and anxieties and to prick the bubbles of exaggeration, pomposity, violence, and oppression by which man is everlastingly threatened.”¹⁵

Adorno didn’t think much of Kracauer’s hermeneutics, which offered, in place of immanent critical analysis, only anecdotal evidence for a “pre-stabilized harmony between society and author.”¹⁶ But he, too, followed Kraus in writing favorably of Offenbach’s “meaningful nonsense” and finding already in Strauß evidence of a “garish operaticism.”¹⁷ Although Adorno did not elaborate on that

last phrase, it is not difficult to interpret. Offenbach’s use of operatic devices is often parodistic, as it is in some of Weill’s work. Both finales in *La Belle Hélène* include cadenzas at the expected location—the end of the *pezzo concertato* that marks a moment of general consternation precipitated by an unexpected *coup de théâtre*. But these passages—absurdly long, written out in every detail, set to colloquial phrases (“Dam! son honneur!”) and nonsense syllables—reveal the solo cadenza, emblem of spontaneous subjectivity, as a calculated, conventional act. It is exteriorized, turned into pure gesture. The operaticism of Strauß and Lehár appears garish in so far as it apes opera like a *parvenu*; the music of Offenbach and Weill behaves more like an *enfant terrible* whose parents have already arrived.

Adorno would echo Kraus’s opinion that operetta was no longer possible after Hitler. His obituary for Weill makes a similar point in order to diagnose why he thought the composer had ultimately failed:

Weill believed himself to be a kind of Offenbach of his century, and as far as swiftness of social-aesthetic reaction and lack of real substance go, the analogy is not without foundation. But the model was not repeatable. *The grimness of reality has become too overwhelming for a parody to measure up to it.*¹⁸

More recently, Carl Dahlhaus has institutionalized for a post-war generation what we might call the “Kraus–Offenbach tradition.” His respective verdicts on Offenbach and Strauß rely on a similar dimension of social criticism. In the waltz finale of *La Belle Hélène*,

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. Above all else, Offenbach knew full well that any music which owes its effect, and its inimitability, to a blend of melancholy and energetic verve will be most irresistible when it rises above tumultuous and seemingly insoluble conflicts with the triumphant indifference of beauty.¹⁹

In contrast, the waltz in the *Fledermaus* finale evokes “a simple aura of camaraderie motivated by nothing more than champagne,” and in the *Zigeunerbaron* finale it devolves into a mere “musical landmark for Vienna” (232). The waltz, which in Metternich’s Vienna could still signify sexual freedom and political emancipation, has become a convention that simply has to be fitted somewhere in an operetta. The problem, as Adorno once quipped, is that “an administered, arranged intoxication ceases to be one.”²⁰

How do Weill’s own views on operetta jibe with this critical tradition? Like many critics in his milieu, Weill was ambivalent about the genre. Not surprisingly, he knew it inside and out. In 1917–1919, first as a pupil of Albert Bing and then as assistant to Hans Knappertsbusch at Dessau’s Friedrich-Theater, he surely had occasion to work on operetta productions, for during those years, the company regularly programmed the classic operettas of Suppé, Strauß, and Millöcker, as well as newer works by Fall, Jessel, Kálmán, Künneke, and Lehár. After Dessau, Weill took a post for the 1920 season as conductor of the Stadt-Theater in Lüdenscheid. That season, a similar mix of Viennese and Berlin operettas predominated. Although Weill complained that the “interminable operetta bilge was getting on his nerves,”²¹ he declared years later

that the experience had taught him everything he knew about the theater.²² Indeed, Weill seems to have found a real affinity for this repertory:

Friday, I was able to bring off a performance of *Der Zigeunerbaron* of which I am justifiably proud. Six days' preparation for this most difficult operetta, next to which a comic opera is child's play, and then not a single gaffe. And the right Straussian verve, besides. I was the hero of the evening with press and public alike; right after the overture there was a storm of applause.²³

As music critic for *Der deutsche Rundfunk* (1925–29) Weill frequently reviewed operetta broadcasts. His views fit comfortably, if less stridently, within the Kraus tradition. On the one hand, he shared Karl Kraus's admiration for Offenbach in light of his continued social relevance:

Offenbach's satire is interpretable in various ways; it need not be confined to its times; it could easily have applied to certain laughable things in our own day.²⁴ (1925)

. . . satire in Offenbach is another form of expression for serious, philosophically-grounded content, which, honed to a point, emerges with the sharpest precision. Music possesses the brilliant means of setting this type of serious parody with dance-like élan, and never has a musician availed himself of these means with Offenbach's mastery.²⁵ (1926)

On the other hand, he didn't fully subscribe to Kraus's verdict on the more "culinary" Viennese tradition. He couldn't bring himself to dismiss Strauß's penultimate operetta *Waldmeister* (1895); the music alone recalls us to a shared humanity, supplying an ethical dimension denied by the text:

Its content says scarcely anything to us anymore; it is based on moral concepts of the [18]80s and strikes us as naive and childish. And yet scarcely have the first tones of the overture sounded than we are cast into a spell. Something reverberates in this music that springs from the realm of the highest art, from something humane.²⁶ (1925)

In the essay "Die fehlende Operette" (1925), Weill suggested a didactic use for operetta: the most effective and intelligent blend of "humor, drama, sentiments, words, dance, and music" that can at the same time 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 exterior visual feast of the revue." Weill argued that it should be the role of radio to revive the classics of Strauß, Millöcker, Suppé, Lecocq, and Sullivan. Such revivals would be enthusiastically received, more so than the "works of art" usually programmed that are in truth inferior to those old operettas. Radio operetta would be one way of limiting the proliferation of kitsch by "releasing the spirits of light and sentimental music."²⁷ But Weill shared Kraus's pessimistic outlook on the current crisis in operetta and doubted whether he could reform it from within:

I'm not so sure that our type of theater will replace operetta. With Goethe [in Lehár's *Friederike*] having reappeared on earth through the medium of an operetta tenor, why shouldn't

another series of historical or at least aristocratic personalities utter their tragic outcry at the end of the second act?²⁸

It was perhaps inevitable that comparisons between Weill and Offenbach should have arisen once he started setting socially significant texts to scores that juxtaposed a variety of musical idioms, creating a type of musical theater that defied easy categorization. However tenuous, these comparisons are part of Weill's reception history. Kraus may have been indirectly responsible for the *Weill als Offenbach* trope circulating among a group of artists and intellectuals that included Robert Vambery:

Was it not somewhere on the well-trodden route between the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm and the Kroll that the notion of "Weill als Offenbach" first began to take shape? To Kraus's way of thinking (not to mention that of Vambery, his young admirer at the Schiffbauerdamm)—it would have been wholly acceptable. For Bloch and Benjamin it might have had at least a passing attraction.²⁹

It certainly attracted Karl Westermeyer, probably the first to discuss Weill in the context of a scholarly history of operetta. *Die Operette im Wandel des Zeitgeistes: von Offenbach bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1931) nowhere mentions Kraus, but it clearly owes its historiographical vision to the editor of *Die Fackel*. For Westermeyer, the significance of Offenbach lay in:

his mastery as a musician in characterizing the parodistic proceedings on a turbulent stage with such acute discrimination that the flow of the action is not merely provided with an illustrative accompaniment; rather the mood of the play, the wit, the irony are obtained through the music's rhythmic élan and the high tension of the activity. (49)

All of this in the service of a "propensity to revolt against all traditional authority." When later operettas tried to use music to plumb psychological depths (as in Lehár's "tragic" second-act finales), they degenerated into a debased romanticism, which Westermeyer, echoing Kraus, labels *Salonromantik* (96–97). Abandoning "the one true path of Offenbach" has resulted in an operetta crisis, a cul-de-sac. Westermeyer hopes that *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which restores to operetta the rhythmic propulsion of Offenbach's *opéra-bouffes*, might signal a regeneration of the genre (176). The resonances here with Weill's anti-psychologism and his concept of *Gestus* are intriguing: Had Westermeyer read "Über den gestischen Charakter der Musik"?

The *Weill als Offenbach* trope has also informed the work of more recent German scholars. In his massive *Kulturgeschichte der Operette* (Munich, 1961), Bernard Grun devotes five pages out of six hundred to Weill. *Die Dreigroschenoper* receives the most attention, most of it focused on comparisons to Offenbach. These are based entirely on the published librettos, with the unfortunate result that Grun's *rapprochement* between Mackie Messer and Falsacappa (*Les Brigands*) draws on a speech that Mackie delivers only in Brecht's 1931 revision, which Weill did not approve (441–442). To be sure, comparisons between Weill and Offenbach usually amount to demonstrating that Brecht and Meilhac & Halévy shared a similar strategy of inverting bourgeois values. When, for example, Bobinet in *La vie parisienne* sings:

continued from p. 12

Or, pour peu qu'on y réfléchisse,
quand on n'a pas le sou, vois-tu,
il est temps de lâcher le vice
pour revenir à la vertu!

he expresses the theme of *Die sieben Todsünden* in a nutshell. To cite another postwar musicologist, Alexander Ringer:

There is little in principle . . . that distinguishes Meilhac-Offenbach's [*sic*] city fathers under the scrutiny of public opinion at the opening of *Orphée aux enfers* from Brecht-Weill's view of the forces of law and order in *Die Dreigroschenoper*.³⁰

Ringer goes further. We associate Offenbach, Kraus, and Weill because they incarnate a distinct critical spirit going back at least to Heinrich Heine and thriving on irony, parody, and satire—a Jewish spirit that forces of reaction would accuse of destroying aesthetic purity (40–41). To be sure, the cantor's son from Cologne and the cantor's son from Dessau faced similar criticism when the political situation around them worsened. After the humiliating defeat of 1870, the French press accused Offenbach of contributing, as Gustave Chouquet put it, to the “moral sickness that recently threatened the entire social body with gangrene . . . corrupting the spirit of our nation, without its being noticed that they were helping to drag our unhappy country to the edge of the abyss.”³¹ With a few changes of names, the hostile reviews aimed at Offenbach read just like attacks on Weill in the *Völkische Beobachter*.

Whether or not Weill himself ever stated that he wanted to be remembered as the Offenbach of the twentieth century, as Adorno claimed, he often did invoke his name. There is, of course, the often-repeated anecdote about the time he asked his publishers to omit the phrase “Weill als Humperdinck” in a press release: “Perhaps you could write instead something along the lines: ‘From Offenbach to Weill,’ or the like.”³² More substantive are the similarities between the aesthetic principles they set forth, usually in the context of propagandizing their own efforts. Offenbach, like many an opera reformer before him, described his innovations as a quest for origins. Unlike the works presented at the state-subsidized Opéra-comique, Offenbach's *opéra-bouffes*, presented in the eponymous commercial theater under his direction, aimed “to revive the primitive and gay genre” of eighteenth-century comic opera by restoring its “simplicity of melodic form and sobriety in instrumentation” and its reliance on dance-derived rhythmic gestures. The elongated forms of nineteenth-century opera, with their emphasis on orchestral and harmonic effects, had “denatured” the purer type. Although Offenbach modestly claimed that his own offerings were only a preliminary step, he hoped that his new theater would pave the way for the renewal and reinvigoration of a genre in decline.³³

Weill's criticism echoes much in Offenbach's 1856 manifesto. Weill, too, had recourse to origins when he distinguished *Dreigroschenoper* from contemporary opera and operetta, identifying it rather as an *Urform* of opera.³⁴ He called for the renewal of traditional number opera, over against Wagnerian music drama, which he admired but deemed a dead end. Shortly after arriving in New York, he envisioned that opera on Broadway might restore the genre to an authentic form:

We can see a field for the building of a new (or the rebuilding of a classical) form. . . . [over the course of the nineteenth century] melody, always the most expressive element of the music theater, was threatened by *over-emphasis on harmony and by orchestral effects*. In an almost diseased passion for musical originality, the central problem of the music theater . . . was lost to sight.³⁵

Like Offenbach, Weill considered non-subsidized theater the right venue for a musical theater at once innovative and popular:

Paralleling the subsidized product was a different kind of opera, built on a far healthier basis as part of the amusement business, by entrepreneurs who recognized and tried to satisfy the need of the masses for a music theatre. The artistic value of such operatic works is often underestimated, because they are popular, completely comprehensible, and have a direct effect on the public. . . . opera must again find a union with the theatre, and return to a simplified, clearer, and direct musical language. . . . It may be that a music theater will rise out of Broadway. There are already many starting points for a new kind of musical comedy here, and Gilbert and Sullivan in England, Offenbach in Paris, and Johann Strauß in Vienna have proved that a musical theater culture of high merit can arise from the field of light music. (185–187)

Weill often presented his *Zwischengattungen* as viable and necessary alternatives to Wagnerian epigones. His most extreme remarks about Wagner appeared in an infamous article in which he meant to explain his music to a readership of children:

I played you excerpts from the music of Wagner and his successors. You have seen for yourselves that there are so many notes in this music I could not even reach them all. You would have liked to sing along with an occasional melody, but that proved impossible. You also noticed that this music tended to make you sleepy or have an intoxicating effect like alcohol or other drugs. But you don't want to be put to sleep. You want music that you can comprehend without special explanations, music you can readily absorb and sing with relative ease.³⁶

The allusions to Nietzsche's critique of Wagner are surely deliberate, and Weill may well have remembered that the philosopher describes the hypnotic effect of Wagner's music in a passage where he opposes the Boulevards to Bayreuth, the Jewish spirit to the Romantic one:

The Jews approached genius in the sphere of art with Heinrich Heine and Offenbach, this most gifted and high-spirited satyr, who as a musician clings to the great tradition, and who is for those who have more than mere ears a real liberation from the sentimental and basically degenerate musicians of German Romanticism. Offenbach: French music with the spirit of Voltaire; free, high-spirited, with a little sardonic grin, but bright, *clever almost to the point of banality* (he doesn't use makeup) and *without the affectation or morbid or blond-Viennese sensuality*. . . . Wagner is heavy and ponderous: nothing is more foreign to him than moments of the most high-spirited perfection, such as this buffoon Offenbach achieves 5 or 6 times in almost every one of his *bouffes*. The pure-blooded Wagnerian is unmusical; *he succumbs to the mental powers of music somewhat as a woman succumbs to the will of her hypnotist*.³⁷

Here are foreshadowed several threads from Weill's writings: freedom from the fear of banality, resistance to art's hypnotic effects, preference for *opéra-bouffé* over Viennese operetta. At least once, Weill also compared Wagner to Offenbach. Explaining to a journalist why he had to orchestrate his Broadway scores at the last minute, sleeping only two hours a night until the job was done, Weill called American musical comedy, in contrast to Wagner's music dramas, "a custom-made job." In this respect, they resembled Offenbach's operettas, also composed with specific singers in mind. In an aside, the interviewer added, "Offenbach and Verdi are to Weill the gods of opera."³⁸

Although connections between Weill and Offenbach depend largely on extra-musical factors, there are musical parallels to be drawn as well. That Weill's conception of gestic music has its foundation in rhythmic figures—frequently dance-based—lends a rhythmic urgency to his music more characteristic of *opéra-bouffé* than of Viennese operetta. In fact, Weill mentioned Offenbach in his essay on musical *Gestus*. Both composers have been noted for their parodistic treatment of operatic conventions, making opera itself a topic. Both have a particular way of blending satire and sentimentality—Marc Blitzstein once called Weill's music "velvet propaganda."³⁹ Or, to cite Weill discussing a *Dreigroschenoper* song: "The appeal of the [Tango-Ballade] lies precisely in the fact that a somewhat risqué text . . . is composed in a tender, pleasant manner."⁴⁰ Likewise, some of Offenbach's most poignant moments, as Walter Benjamin once pointed out, are those when he allows a pastoral tone ("Au mont Ida") or a dream-like state ("Ce n'est qu'un rêve") to distract listeners momentarily from the corrupt lunacy that predominates, allowing them to forget that Paris is merely a *roué* and Helen a bored *cocotte*. At such times, his music seems to go against the very stance that Meilhac and Halévy want us to take. Like Offenbach—or Heine, for that matter—Weill invites an ambivalent attitude suspended somewhere between sentimentality and irony.

So there was a nexus of reasons why, after the rigors of *Die Bürgschaft*, Weill might have turned to the image of Offenbach for inspiration. At that point, he considered collaborating with Georg Kaiser on something in a more popular vein for the producer Erik Charell—not an opera but rather another *Zwischengattungs-Stück*:

I reserve the right either to make of it a "play with music," that is, with quite simple songs which could be sung by straight actors, or to set about making greater musical demands and write music of the extent and difficulty of a piece of an Offenbach Musiquette. *The latter would attract me more, because I could here go beyond the type created in Die Dreigroschenoper.*⁴¹

In the event, he realized both aims. He composed *Der Silbersee* as a *Singspiel*, and the operetta project became *Der Kuhhandel*. It was written at a difficult time, when Karl Kraus, its "spiritual father," was sounding the death knell of political operetta.⁴² The circumstances that led Weill to compose an "operetta after Hitler" and the hermeneutical deciphering of the result have been presented by David Drew in a critical *tour de force*. Thanks to its contemporary relevance and satirical intent, *Kuhhandel* approaches the Offenbachian model far more than the Viennese, Weill's goal having been to "continue the best operetta tradition, but a long way off from the Viennese operetta rubbish."⁴³

More "immanent" connections to Offenbach are harder to come by. There are stylistic details, such as the manner in which Weill accents every beat in the *galop* (with 2/4 and 3/4 metric alterna-

tions!) that ends the second-act finale ("Wir haben keine Ehre, wir haben keine Gewehre"). Then there is the mastery with which Weill handles the first-act dance finale. The "ganze Haute Volée" of Santa Maria, attending a reception at the presidential palace, sing the praises of "Veuve Clicquot," oblivious to the brewing political storm. Weill brilliantly sets their gossip as a *Konversationswalzer* over a continuous dance rhythm. When a *coup d'état* interrupts their dancing, they react, without so much as a collective blink, by singing, "Die starke Hand hat Gott gesandt! Gerettet ist das Vaterland!" (Was Vambery familiar with the SA marching song "Ein stark'n Führer war uns gesandt, die Heimat, die Heimat zu retten!?!") Dahlhaus's sociological analysis of the *Belle Hélène* finale couldn't be more pertinent, although the manner in which Weill's swindlers co-opt the music of the swindled rather more brutal than Offenbach's *bonhomie* would have allowed.

Weill's finales resemble Offenbach's in their scope and in the simplicity of their tonal designs, in which fifth- and third-relations predominate. In Weill's second finale, the tonal plan consists largely of falling thirds: B♭M–GM–E♭M–(G)–Cm–FM–E♭M–(CM)–EM–CM–A♭M–CM. With the exception of a brief passage in E major—a reminiscence of the betrothal scene from act one—the large-scale bass plan is entirely diatonic in C minor. Weill's scheme captures quite neatly the insight that the positive C-major dénouement, textually motivated by the *deus ex machina* of providentially defective guns, represents at best a tenuous restoration of social harmony grafted onto an underlying background structure with which it remains at odds.

The formal designs of Weill's finales, however, scarcely resemble Offenbach's. When Drew asserts that they "remain true to [Offenbach's] formal conventions," he surely refers to the more general similarities broached above. Offenbach's finales usually follow a scheme that owes much to the *solita forma* of his Italian models: Chorus—*tempo d'attacca*—*pezzo (largo) concertato*—*tempo di mezzo*—*stretto*. Weill's finales, so far as I can tell, do not derive from any fixed form but rather from the dramatic situation at hand. The treatment of Juan and Juanita's offstage letter duet in the first-act finale is a brilliant stroke *in its context*. Like so many of Weill's most imaginative moments, it is virtually unrepeatable.

There is another significant difference between *Kuhhandel* and the Offenbach model. The *opéra-bouffés* are imbued throughout with a cynical acceptance of generalized corruption. Hints of a prelapsarian arcadia are rare; John Styx's song in *Orphée* is an exception. Offenbach's euphoric moments—as in the dance finales he virtually invented—are symptoms of collective folly. Moments when Offenbach's individuals—as individuals—achieve happiness are few, and when they do, they often feign they are dreaming. Lyricism is justified by illusion. In contrast, a certain idealism persists in Weill's operetta. The agrarian life of Santa Maria, with its quaint betrothal customs, represents an idyll threatened by urban-industrial development. The peasant couple is forced by financial exigencies into the city, he as a factory worker, she as a prostitute. The lovers have been altered by their projection into history, much as their counterparts in Weill's later *Love Life*. Despite the conventional operetta happy ending, it is unlikely that the ambiance established early in the work can ever be restored—but there does remain the memory of it. *Der Kuhhandel* is an operetta marked by a historical consciousness at odds with the sustained dream state that defined operetta for Kraus. (We know what happened on the real island of Hispaniola two years after the London production of *A Kingdom for a Cow*. The mountain stream forming the border between the two rival nations, the setting for Juan and Juanita's fishing tryst at the beginning of act one, would become known as

the “Massacre River” after Trujillo’s men killed numerous Haitians living in the border region and threw their corpses into it.)

Weill turned to operetta one more time in 1943–44. Once again he was at an artistic crossroads. *Lady in the Dark* was another unrepeatable experiment, so thoroughly enmeshed was its musical design with that of Moss Hart’s play. *One Touch of Venus* was a hit, but Weill wanted to achieve more musical-formal breadth than the confines of such musical comedies would permit. I have described elsewhere the painful path from Weill’s vision of “a very entertaining and yet original kind of *opéra-comique* on the Offenbach line” to its considerably attenuated realization as *The Firebrand of Florence*.⁴⁴ Many of the problems that bedeviled that unfortunate production were out of Weill’s hands. Still, it is disorienting to read Weill urging Mayer to soften Cellini’s character and make the love interest more sincere. Equally strange to read him explaining to Gershwin why there should be a “tragic” second-act finale at the end of the trial scene, putting into Cellini’s mouth more or less the same lines that Goethe and Paganini utter in the Lehár finales that Weill once derided.

Perhaps Karl Kraus was right and the time for an Offenbach renaissance had passed. In 1938 Weill had composed *Knickerbocker Holiday*, which could almost be considered a political operetta, were it not for the modest scope of most of its individual numbers. Four years later Helen Hayes wanted to record one of those numbers, “How Can You Tell an American?” Lenya worried that Maxwell Anderson’s lyrics had become inappropriate: “Darling maybe Max could change a little bit the lyrics for the american song. . . . ‘free of governmental snuping’ it wouldn’t be the right thing to say right now.”⁴⁵ It’s just an afterthought in a letter, but perhaps it explains a good deal.

Notes

1. Hans Heinsheimer, “German Music on the Breadline,” *Modern Music* 9 (1932): 115–20.

2. Weill, “Wirklich eine Opernkrise?,” *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 July 1932; trans. Kim H. Kowalke in *Kurt Weill in Europe* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1979), 543.

3. Hinton, “Issues in the German Reception of Weill,” *KWN* 11/1 (spring 1993): 7.

4. Weill to Heinsheimer, 14 October 1929. Trans. modified from Christopher Hailey’s in *KWN* 3/1 (spring 1985): 14.

5. Weill, “Verschiebungen in der musikalischen Produktion,” *Die Musik* 20 (1927): 206.

6. Weill, “The Future of Opera in America,” *Modern Music* 14 (1937): 186.

7. Weill, “Die Oper—wohin?,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, 31 October 1929; trans. in *Weill in Europe*, 506.

8. Weill, “The Alchemy of Music,” *Stage* (November 1936): 63–64; rpt. *KWN* 4/2 (fall 1986): 7.

9. *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 10/7 (1928): 257–259.

10. All quoted in *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera*, ed. Stephen Hinton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 129, 56, 18, 286.

11. Paul Stefan, “Zukunft der Operette,” *Anbruch* 11/3 (1929): 115.

12. Ernst Bloch, “Mozart-Lehár” (1929), trans. Andrew Jorel in *Literary Essays* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 14.

13. E.g., “Über den gestischen Charakter der Musik,” *Die Musik* 21 (1929): 419–23.

14. Quoted in Kari Grimstad, *Masks of the Prophet: The Theatrical World of Karl Kraus* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), 244.

15. Kracauer, *Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1938), 82.

16. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1937): 697.

17. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B.

Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 22.

18. Adorno, “Kurt Weill,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 April 1950; trans. in David Drew, “Reflections on the Last Years: *Der Kuhhandel* as a Key Work,” in *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill*, ed. Kim H. Kowalke (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986) 219 (italics mine).

19. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 228–29.

20. *Sociology of Music*, 25.

21. Kurt to Hans Weill, 11 January 1920. In *Kurt Weill: Briefe an die Familie (1914–1950)*, ed. Lys Symonette and Elmar Juchem (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), letter 141.

22. “Protagonist of Music in the Theatre,” *The American Hebrew*, 8 January 1937.

23. Kurt to Hans Weill, 22 March 1920, in *Briefe an die Familie*, letter 147.

24. Weill, *Musik und musikalisches Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, with Elmar Juchem (Mainz, 2000), 243.

25. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 335.

26. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 290–291.

27. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 285–287.

28. Weill, “Korrespondenz über *Die Dreigroschenoper*,” *Anbruch* 11/1 (1929): 24, trans. Hinton in *The Threepenny Opera*, 123–125.

29. Drew, “*Kuhhandel* as Key Work,” 252.

30. Alexander Ringer, “Kleinkunst und Küchenlied in the Socio-musical World of Kurt Weill,” in *A New Orpheus*, 41. Offenbach’s librettist on this occasion was not Meilhac but Hector Crémieux. Halévy served as an uncredited “book doctor.”

31. Gustave Chouquet, “Wagner et Offenbach,” *L’art musicale* 12/9 (27 February 1873): 66; cited in Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach’s Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000): 95.

32. Weill to Universal Edition, 17 October 1928, trans. Christopher Hailey, WLRC. Original published in *Kurt Weill: Briefwechsel mit der Universal Edition*, ed. Nils Grosch (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), letter 467.

33. Jacques Offenbach, “Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens,” *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* 29 (20 July 1856): 229–231.

34. Weill, “Korrespondenz,” trans. Hinton in *The Threepenny Opera*, 123.

35. Weill, “The Future of Opera in America,” *Modern Music* 14 (1937): 183–184 (my italics).

36. Weill, “Der Musiker Weill,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, 25 December 1928, trans. Alexander Ringer in “Relevance and the Future of Opera,” in *Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Jew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 90.

37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), par. 829, 832–34, 839. Italics mine.

38. Warren Story Smith, “Music of Kurt Weill Called Unusual,” *Boston Sunday Post* (26 September 1943).

39. “Weill Scores for *Johnny Johnson*,” *Modern Music* 14/1 (1936): 45.

40. Weill to Universal-Edition, 10 September 1928. Quoted in Kim H. Kowalke, “Accounting for Success: Misunderstanding *Die Dreigroschenoper*,” *Opera Quarterly* 6/3 (1989): 30.

41. Weill to Universal Edition, 29 July 1932. Italics mine. Unpublished translation in WLRC. Original published in *Briefwechsel*, letter 1228.

42. The formulation is Drew’s (“*Kuhhandel* as Key Work,” 221).

43. Weill to Curjel, 19 April 1934. Copy in WLRC.

44. “Operetta as Revenant,” *KWN* 17/2 (1999): 24–28. Introduction, *The Firebrand of Florence*, Kurt Weill Edition, Series I:18 (New York: European-American Music, 2002).

45. *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, ed. and trans. Lys Symonette and Kim Kowalke (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), letter 247.

Books

Dialog der Künste: Die Zusammenarbeit von Kurt Weill und Yvan Goll

Ricarda Wackers

Münster: Waxmann, 2004 (Veröffentlichungen der Kurt-Weill-Gesellschaft Dessau, vol. 5), 326 pp.
ISBN: 3-8309-1369-9

“Nobody has read me,” Dejanira complains in Kurt Weill’s and Yvan Goll’s opera *Royal Palace*. The same could be said about the work itself, even about the collaboration as a whole between Weill and the French-German poet. Goll’s libretto for *Royal Palace*, almost completely ignored by Goll scholars, has often been uncomprehendingly dismissed in the literature on Weill. The most extreme case was Thomas Heyn’s proposal to replace Goll’s supposedly “unbearable” libretto with a new text. Weill’s collaboration with Goll on *Royal Palace* has typically been judged a dead end in the composer’s development.

Given such a history, the merit of Ricarda Wackers’s new interdisciplinary study about the collaboration between Goll and Weill can hardly be overstated. The study is a published version of a dissertation in the departments of German literature and musicology at the University of Saarbrücken. It views the poem “Der neue Orpheus” and, for the first time, the libretto for *Royal Palace* in the context of Goll’s oeuvre, revealing the literary and aesthetic concepts upon which the works are based. With the help of detailed musical analysis Wackers is able to show how Weill merged these concepts with his own musical ideas. She also shows the proximity of Goll’s and Weill/Busoni’s ideas on many aesthetic questions and the function of art in society; this touches, among other things, on the techniques of distancing and “dis-illusioning” in the theater which Goll had been using for a long time when he employed them in the libretto for *Royal Palace*. Thus Wackers can argue plausibly that the collaboration with Goll represents an important step in Weill’s artistic development.

Wackers sees *Royal Palace* as a key work in Goll’s output: the last and—as it turned out—failed attempt to gain acceptance for his concept of surrealism in the line of Guillaume Apollinaire. Goll’s surrealism, with its emphasis on conscious, artistic production, differs from André Breton’s surrealism, which depends heavily on dreams and the subconscious. In line with this concept is the above mentioned goal of exposing art as art, the “conscious disruption of illusion” which Wackers identifies as the “central guiding principle of *Royal Palace*” (p. 221). Also crucial in the context of *Royal Palace* as an opera are Goll’s attempts, inspired by Apollinaire, to synthesize various art forms. The film sequence in *Royal Palace* is indebted to Goll’s lively interest in film as a force for renewing drama. It becomes clear that *Royal Palace* is not out of place in Goll’s oeuvre: In comparing it to other Goll works, Wackers unveils numerous dramaturgical, motivic, and character links to earlier plays such as *Mélusine* and *Methusalem*. She is also able to show connections between *Royal Palace* and later novels by Goll which feature disillusionment and resignation.

Regrettably, hardly any autograph material has survived for *Royal Palace* which would allow for a better insight into the collaboration and the work’s genesis. Neither earlier drafts of the libretto nor Weill’s full score survives. Nevertheless, Wackers is able to provide a thorough and informative analysis of the music by turning to the published piano reduction. Additional sources give important clues about the division of labor in preparing the libretto for publication: Here, the composer seems to have assumed full responsibility.

In considering Wackers’s approach, one notices a certain difference between the interdisciplinary “program” and its actual execution. In her introduction, she notes that the “specialized disciplines” had neither “grasped” the particular nature of *Der neue Orpheus* and *Royal Palace* nor realized that it is “highly problematic to deal with the individual components of text and music separately or even to judge them separately” (p. 14). And yet, Wackers undertakes a similar division: the two analyses of the works are split into a purely textual analysis and a separate analysis of the music (which makes use of the preceding text analysis). This is not entirely surprising: If Wackers’s opening reproach is directed at text analysis or literary research, it doesn’t make much sense. This is especially apparent in the case of *Der neue Orpheus*, whose text was written as a self-contained literary work. When considering the libretto for *Royal Palace* one cannot neglect the fact that Goll wrote the text to be set to music, but a purely textual analysis and a judgment of the text before it was set to music is still permissible with reference to the libretto theory of Albert Gier or Wackers’s own approach. This procedure, in which the text is treated as an independent literary work and not as a mere servant to the composition, means a big advantage over her declared method. And musical analysis also benefits from the results of a thorough literary analysis.

From a literary perspective, Wackers’s analysis of the poem “Der neue Orpheus” (in the version that Weill set to music) is one of the most important parts of the study. Here, Wackers revises her own interpretation published in 1998 (“Eurydike folgt nicht mehr,” in: *Kurt Weill: Die frühen Werke [Musik-Konzepte, vols. 101/102]*, pp. 105–29); she shows convincingly that Orpheus’s suicide is not the result of an insufficient integration into the modern world but a realization that everything has remained as it was: in both past and present the artist cannot redeem humanity (see pp. 169–173). Perhaps Wackers could have mentioned here (as she does on p. 200) that a similar interpretation of the text can be found in the program note for the canata’s 1927 premiere—a text that may have been authored in part by Weill.

In her analysis of the music, Wackers tries to determine why Weill chose to make Orpheus’s journey into the human underworld the high point of the composition, rather than the suicide, which is the climax of the poem. She views the “variation section” as an instance of Weill’s striving for a pluralism of styles, an artistic idea which he develops fully in *Royal Palace*. As Wackers shows, the variations are not derived from a single theme in the traditional sense but represent self-contained treatments (also in the Busonian sense) of seven different musical styles. Equally insightful is the discussion of the solo violin and the harp. Wackers points out that the former represented a jazz instrument in Weimar Germany (as in Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*) and thus represents Orpheus’s modernity, whereas the latter forms a link to the lyre of the mythological Orpheus.

The early chapters on Goll’s oeuvre and his beliefs as an artist shed much light, albeit indirectly, on the libretto for *Royal Palace*. As a consequence, the literary analysis of the libretto is relatively

short, but it covers most aspects of this often misunderstood text. Wackers's discussion of the portrayal of women is noteworthy—in particular Dejanira, who proves to be a very complex character on close inspection. Several interesting details about her name are adduced, and a parallel to Wedekind's Lulu seems particularly enlightening. The author makes an important observation about the role of The Husband, who functions as a “play commentator” (p. 227) both in- and outside the action, thereby embodying the disrupted illusion.

There are some problems, however. On p. 234 Wackers claims that Goll's libretto deals with “the purpose of art, its capabilities, and its actual chances for an impact outside the artistic realm” but does so only “on a formal level” and “not on a content level.” I believe this is too narrow a view, for the libretto presents primarily fantasies and imaginings that fail when confronted with their real-life subject (Dejanira). It wouldn't be a big leap to view the three unsuccessful suitors, who present their imaginings through large-scale, advanced artistic means, as an ironic metaphor for the artist whose art has no validity outside the fantasy realm.

In her musical analysis of *Royal Palace*, Wackers points out that jazz and tango elements are not employed for their own sake but usually serve a dramaturgical purpose. For instance, the fox-trot during the film sequence is “‘defamiliarized,’ as it were” by harmonic shifts (p. 263). Especially regarding the tango finale, Wackers draws useful parallels to *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End*: the employment of the tango as commentary on broken gender relations occurs already in *Royal Palace* and is not an invention of the Weill/Brecht works. Wackers takes advantage of this fact in her unmistakable efforts to demolish the usual Weill/Brecht truisms. Her analysis shows that *Royal Palace* is a rather compelling argument against the well-worn myth that it was Brecht who introduced the illusion-shattering, “epic” elements in Weill's work, even bringing out the “Weill in Weill.” In light of the long struggle against such stubborn clichés, it is surprising that Weill scholars have devoted so little time to *Royal Palace*.

Within the context of Weill's development, it is intriguing to read that “harmonically identifiable tonal centers” occur more often in *Royal Palace* than in previous compositions of Weill's (p. 256). The opera's montage or number character, as Wackers briefly notes, doesn't keep the various sections from being connected; rather, they “cross or dovetail” (p. 242). This could have been mentioned as another fact that points to the future: Such transitions, where a section's final note or chord occurs in new musical surroundings, are employed masterfully in the montage structure of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, for example, where they have clear dramaturgical functions.

Another rewarding feature is Wackers's analysis of the many different guises and functions in which the main motif, linked to Dejanira, appears, and also her observations on the musical contrasts between the mythological lake set and the fashionable hotel world. Overall, the musical analysis of *Royal Palace*, moving carefully through the whole work step by step, is surely one of the richest and best that a single work of Weill has received to date.

In her preface, Wackers admits that the study “presents facts that are already well known in particular disciplines” in order to give “readers the opportunity to become familiar with the subject” (p. 7). Still, a lot of information could have been presented more succinctly; the Goll chapter especially could easily have been compressed by means of references to recent standard works by Matthias Müller-Lentrod and Michael Knauf. In fact, the chapter on Goll's “artistic beliefs,” which includes a lengthy excursus on

Apollinaire, is no less than five times longer than the corresponding chapter on Weill.

Despite the general depth of detail, there are some rather bold statements and assessments that lack the necessary preparatory discussion. Wackers's claim that the film sequence in *Royal Palace* advances the action (p. 219) seems to be uncritically adopted from an early review of the premiere. As she shows elsewhere, the film represents an interruption of the play, an illusion-shattering and “defamiliarizing” element; it remains unclear how it can advance the action at the same time. And terms that prove to be critical for her study, such as “epic” and “defamiliarizing,” would have benefited from a more thorough discussion.

The labeling of Weill's one-acter *Der Protagonist* as an “example of German verismo opera” (p. 280)—albeit with a cautionary qualifier that the label is “exaggerated”—could at best serve as a starting point for a debate on verismo and Weill (a debate that would seem more appropriate for *Street Scene*). Here, no justification is given for the label: *Der Protagonist* is not analyzed thoroughly enough, and the term “verismo,” problematic in both literature and opera studies, does not appear elsewhere in the book. Even if parallels could be drawn to Italian verismo operas (“unadorned cruelties in everyday life,” etc.), it is doubtful that the work as a whole, much less Kaiser's and Weill's aesthetics, could properly be assigned such a label, even if the label admittedly represents an overstatement.

At the very end it seems that the desire for striking conclusions overrides the general care for precise and substantive argumentation. Although Wackers thinks that Weill achieved a synthesis of Busonian “new classicality” and Gollian surrealism in *Royal Palace*, she vehemently opposes the label “surrealist opera” for the work. This discussion, which is crucial to a study in which the term “surrealism” plays a key role, occupies a mere three pages (pp. 289–291) replete with contradictory arguments, and thus represents the book's only serious flaw. In essence, this passage is a not very original criticism of Adorno's characterization of Weill's compositional method in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Whether the label “surrealist opera” should be applied to *Royal Palace*—independent of Adorno's critique of ideology and employing a concept of surrealism that makes use of the Goll and Apollinaire versions—is a question that is addressed not nearly as carefully as it should have been.

However, these are relatively minor points. Wackers's study is undoubtedly of immense relevance for both Goll and Weill scholarship. Goll scholars will be compelled to consider the libretto of *Royal Palace* within the context of Goll's oeuvre. Future Weill research has no excuse for parroting superficial normative judgments about Goll or for deeming the collaboration irrelevant to the composer's development. Ricarda Wackers's all in all careful argumentation serves to overcome such views perpetuated by sloppy research and represents a clear sign of solid scholarship.

Esbjörn Nyström
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Performances

Here Lies Jenny (revue)

Zipper Theatre, New York City

27 May – 3 October 2004

A petite, waifish woman enters a seedy waterfront bar, late at night. She sings (in three languages) of the crummy cards life has dealt her, particularly of the many men who have abused her. Perhaps inspired by her songs, the men in the bar start to abuse her, too. Some know her already, some don't, but it doesn't matter much. This is, after all, a Kurt Weill revue, and we've all been here before. Many, many, many times.

For Weill revues come in two varieties: the first concentrates on Weill's journey "from Berlin to Broadway," the second on the seedy, low-life characters depicted in so many of Weill's songs. On the strength of the evidence, these would seem to be the only options available to the people who devise such shows, and Weill's music seems to evoke no other images than these. Presumably, audiences are supposed not to notice the similarity, or else they clamor constantly for more.

Here Lies Jenny, the title of the present undertaking and very much of the "Bills Ballhaus in Bilbao" variety, was conceived by the English actor/director Roger Rees as a showcase for the actress Bebe Neuwirth, his colleague from the popular sitcom *Cheers*, with the assistance of several of her colleagues from the Broadway revival of *Chicago*. The story Rees tells with Weill's songs isn't entirely coherent—which at least has the merit of not feeling forced—and he does have the good grace to inject the scenes with leavening humor and feistiness. This Jenny has known hard knocks, but she's not altogether downtrodden. But the show was often a thoroughly predictable bore.

So many of Weill's best songs are as much about the characters they describe as

they are about the characters who sing about those characters: it's Lilian Holiday who sings about the girl who loves "Surabaya Johnny," Polly Peachum who sings about "Seeräuberjenny," Liza Elliott who sings "The Saga of Jenny." That ironic context lends interest and dimension; it's conveyed in the words, of course, but it informs much of Weill's music, even the ostensibly straightforward stuff. Surely it wouldn't be too difficult to reflect that irony on even the smallest revue stage. Why do the producers of Weill revues never present the schoolteacher who sings "Nannas Lied," the housewife who sings "J'attends un navire," the junior-varsity football team who sing "Kanonen Song," the priest who sings "Alabama Song"?



Jim (Greg Butler) and John (Shawn Emamjomeh) flank Jenny (Bebe Neuwirth).

Photo: Carol Rosegg

Rees and his musical collaborator, Leslie Stifelman (currently musical director of *Chicago*), delved into the trunk for a few numbers that don't usually make appearances in Weill revues (*The Eternal Road*'s "Song of Ruth," for example), and they didn't smother the songs with excessive reverence. Several numbers were performed only in snippets; even a crowd-pleasing "Saga of Jenny" lost a verse and chorus. However, the creators' respect for the music remained clear, as demonstrated at this performance by the deft touch of Chris Fenwick at the piano.

Neuwirth possesses many talents; she'd be the sort of performer Weill liked best, were it not that singing is the weakest of her assets. Her alto voice is pleasant but thin and often nasal; her range seems to have narrowed since her triumph, eight years ago, in the Broadway revival of *Chicago*.

(She was cheated of the role of Velma in the film version, as practically anybody will tell you in the Theater District's finer watering holes.) She's far from the stereotypical lady baritone who turns to Weill's music in late career, but it's as a dancer that Neuwirth really excels. This means there aren't many leading parts for her in the Weill canon, and even in this tailor-made revue, she was so busy singing that she seldom had opportunity to do any real dancing. Another *Chicago* alumna, Ann Reinking, choreographed *Here Lies Jenny*; it might be great fun to see what she and Neuwirth could do with the ballets from *One Touch of Venus*, but alas, Neuwirth's singing isn't strong enough to carry *Die sieben Todsünden*.

Though her acting skills are indisputable, she missed a number of beats here. Gisela May could get laughs on the "Nein" in "Barbara Song," in German before an English-speaking audience; even in English, Neuwirth didn't seem to understand what "No" meant. In Rees' over-literal staging of "The Tale of the Soldier's Wife," the actress clutched a folded American (*huh?*) flag as a symbol of her widowhood, while she groped for mawkish sentiment. Such moments aside, Neuwirth gave repeated proofs of her wit, beauty, regal poise and show-biz savvy, in numbers from "The Saga of Jenny" to "Je ne t'aime pas."

Joining Neuwirth were actor/singer Ed Dixon (George), singing robustly as the not-quite-kindly bar owner who may be Jenny's ex-lover; and the burly Shawn Emamjomeh (John) and burlier Greg Butler (Jim), dancers playing the sort of waterfront toughs who'll steal a girl's wallet, then buy her a bottle of gin. The *Chicago* affiliations of so many of the artists necessitated a late curtain—performances began at eleven o'clock at night—these folks were literally moonlighting.

The tiny Zipper Theatre, in a slowly gentrifying neighborhood, housed Neil Patel's simple, generic set; the equally banal costumes were designed by Kaye Voyce.

William V. Madison
New York City

Performances

Der Zar lässt sich photographieren Die sieben Todsünden

Landestheater Schleswig-Holstein
Flensburg / Schleswig /
Rendsburg

Premiere: 15 May 2004

A short opera about an assassination attempt on a national ruler, a ballet whose subject is individuals estranged from themselves in a society oriented entirely towards materialism—such topics touch on current issues in politics and society. The double bill presented by the Landestheater Schleswig-Holstein seems to have had a political agenda. This is particularly remarkable, since Germany’s “provincial theaters,” which have been subject to growing financial pressure in recent years, have relied on apolitical, easily digested operas, operettas, and musicals.

Perhaps ironically, Schleswig-Holstein’s Landestheater found itself entangled in a discussion about budget cuts right around the time of this premiere (which in turn was used as an occasion to protest the proposed cuts and to argue for the theater’s continuing operation). Ironic also because neither work was really presented in a staging that highlighted current political or social events; on the contrary, *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* in particular came across as a period piece from the 1920s. And yet, this Kurt Weill evening demonstrated the extent to which cultural diversity and quality are at stake.

“What was topical seventy years ago remains so today (alas). However, Kurt Weill was no finger-pointing critic of society but a full-blooded musician whose compositions were melodic, inventive, and rhythmically pronounced,” the program notes tell us. The statement neatly sums up the dilemma of the Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landestheater: While the social significance of a Weill evening is deliberate, and acknowledged by the theater, the works’ topicality and clear political agenda are downplayed (perhaps to avoid irritating regular patrons?). The ostensible opposi-

tion of a “finger-pointing critic of society” and a “full-blooded musician” makes this all the more evident. The topicality of the two Weill works is not hidden, but it is not emphasized either.

Manfred Repp’s staging of *Der Zar* is a case in point. Weill and Kaiser conceived their “opera buffa” as a *Zeitoper* set in the present, which used modern technological devices on stage and in the music. Repp is content to stage the piece in a 1920s style that is only occasionally transgressed by the ironic male chorus which sporadically comments on the action with clownish costumes and gestures. What this staging does best is to highlight the musico-dramatic quality, the theatricality, and the entertainment value of this rarely performed one-acter. The director all but choreographs the characters’ movements and includes many slapstick moments and details coordinated with the music, thereby successfully revealing the playfully anarchic character of the early Weill and making it accessible to modern ears and eyes. Antje Bitterlich (as False Angèle) and Jörg Sändig (Czar) sang and acted on a surprisingly high level, as did the Schleswig-Holstein Symphony Orchestra led by Theo Saye. A minor, but regrettable detail: the use of “new” media on stage such as telephone and gramophone no longer has an impact; since the staging didn’t acknowledge the startling effect such devices had on the audience in 1928, their novelty was wasted.

It turned out to be a wise decision not to combine *Der Zar* with *Der Protagonist*, as Weill had originally intended, but with the ballet chanté *Die sieben Todsünden*. The more plainspoken social criticism in Brecht’s text combined with Weill’s music—which the audience found more pleasing—carry the playfully staged conflicts of *Der Zar* a step further. The nearly choreographic movements in the staging of *Zar* now become pure choreography with the two Annas, as choreographer Stela Korljan benefited from the dancing skills of singer Olivia Saragosa.

Leaving behind the style of the late 1920s, a timeless set and costumes constitute the “backdrop” for the Annas and their pursuit of happiness which, for Anna I and her family, means only monetary



Antje Bitterlich (false Angele) and Jörg Sändig (Czar)

Photo: Landestheater Schleswig-Holstein

wealth, causing the sisters’ increasing alienation. In the beginning, both are dressed identically and they even move identically, but little by little Anna I adopts the insignia of acquired wealth, becoming more static, whereas Anna II (danced splendidly by Anika Hendrix) becomes more intense and desperate in her movements. A few dramaturgical inconsistencies in the choreography are balanced by the strong ending which shows the family, not Anna I, to be triumphant. Although the orchestra, conducted after intermission by Hsiao-Lin Liao, at times threatened to overpower the beautiful but smallish voice of Saragosa, the evening on a whole was musically quite satisfying.

Even without a politicized staging concept that convinces on an artistic level (something to be expected perhaps only from the larger houses), this evening demonstrated how important and indispensable the smaller theaters are for a diverse and ambitious cultural life.

Mathias Lehmann
Hamburg

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Staatstheater Nürnberg

Premiere: 17 July 2004

It didn't turn out to be a concert performance, even though the orchestra had been lifted out of the pit and claimed more than two-thirds of the available space on stage. What was offered instead was colorful, garish *Regietheater* from director Hansgünther Heyme (set: Christoph Sehl; costumes: Anna Börnsen) on the precious remaining space: the covered pit, the back of the stage, and a narrow aisle between the strings and the wind instruments. At first it seemed as if a historicizing portrait of an all-devouring German metropolis was intended—Scheidemann's proclamation of the Weimar Republic at the beginning, the backdrop showing a gigantic stock exchange floor, and prominently featured above the entire stage, the mirror-image lettering, "Dem deutschen Volke," as if the audience looked out from the German Reichstag (which bears this inscription), witnessing the doomed development of the Weimar Republic. And, at least in part, that's what happened: impoverished masses with no hope for a better future, long lines of freezing people covered in blankets in front of a soup kitchen (not the only image that was intended as an awkward contrast to the "actual" situation of the work, which, at this very moment, mentioned pleasure and "eternal art" to unsettling piano music). But everything changed when the protagonists came onstage; the picture expanded as the historical and more contemporary elements collided, and it became clear: here we have a multilayered, critical, and up-to-the-minute production.

Naturally, the director took the devices of Brecht's epic theater to heart and showed us figures which intentionally revealed contradictions and contrasts. While the trio of city founders first appears as the holy family (complete with bishop's crozier and a plastic Christ on a hand truck), it takes little time for them to transform into very American capitalists (Trinity Moses, for instance, affecting a

dollar sign pendant around his neck). The remaining protagonists in their mask-like makeup also showed signs of defamiliarization and distancing: the four lumberjacks from Alaska with chimpanzee faces, Jenny and the girls in bright white and colored dresses, reminiscent of circus princesses, and even the choristers' faces bore white handprints, blurring their identities. The often flashy, in-your-face costumes emphasized the distance between the singers and their roles and managed to stifle any sympathy for the characters. With their loud dresses and platform shoes, Jenny and the girls recalled 1960s fashion (or east Asian theater, much appreciated by Brecht); and Jim's casual outfit, complete with knit cap, in acid pink, orange, and light-blue colors reflected on the utter lack of taste in today's leisure clothes (further emphasized in Act II by the chorus masses who cheered their idol Jimmy and his "everything's fair game" motto, wearing the very same outfit).

This distancing of the characters and action was sustained in the evening's second part, when four revue-like sequences showed the excesses of life ("eating," "loving," "boxing," and "drinking") and the respective protagonists were replaced or accompanied by others, like a school of garden gnomes. All this seemed rather silly, when the gnomes, led by governesses, fed yogurt to the painted image of an obese man, spied on an older fellow getting lucky, or watched a boxing match that appeared only on a TV screen.

In light of the abundance of materials, one wondered exactly which current society Heyme was evoking, given the fact that Weill and Brecht had focused on the slow sinking of a metropolis into a chaos of diverging interests. Is it our society that has created for itself a fake idyll within the general chaos, filled with yogurt cups, voyeurism, television, garden gnomes, and Barbie dolls (which populated the stage toward the end in large numbers)? Perhaps Heyme has hidden his answer behind many layers of contradictory details and confusing witticisms, all of them so complex that at the end the execution of Jimmy was simply forgotten (intentionally?). In any event, we didn't see any of the "difficult images" that had been announced before the pre-



The lumberjacks meet Jenny in act I. Photo: Marion Bührlé

miere; instead, we got a colorful staging, obsessed with detail, and it seemed that the Nuremberg audience thanked the director for precisely that with a warm round of applause. One wonders if that's what he wanted.

The singing was simply excellent and it rescued the evening, all the more remarkable considering that the main characters often had their backs to the conductor, in constant worry about their cues. Leading the ensemble was a splendid Frances Pappas (Jenny), matched by Richard Kindley as a strong and polished Jim Mahoney. The city founders' trio was wonderfully cast with Teresa Erbe (Begbick), Timo Päch (Fatty) and the large and precise voice of Heinz-Klaus Ecker (Trinity Moses). Regrettably, this trio was banished to the gallery at the rear of the stage during the last act's trial scene, where they were almost drowned out by the chorus and orchestra. But making sure the voices were heard and communication between singers and musicians were the least of the director's concerns. At times it seemed that the Nuremberg Philharmonic and its conductor, Christian Reuter, surrendered to the director's concept (perhaps they were worn out at the end of the season), as they delivered a solid but uninspired performance. For all that, at times their full symphonic drive showed itself, and the most operatic moments of the score ("Wenn der Himmel hell wird" and the "Kraniche Duett") were the evening's musical highlights. They showed that the soloists and orchestra have the potential to rescue this endeavor with renewed energy next season.

Rainer Franke
Universität Bayreuth

Recordings

Royal Palace *Der neue Orpheus*

BBC Symphony Orchestra
Sir Andrew Davis, conductor

Capriccio 60 106

With this recording, the last gap in the discography of Kurt Weill's surviving pre-1933 operas has been filled. *Royal Palace*, to a libretto by Yvan Goll, lasted for only six further performances after its prestigious 1927 premiere at the Berlin State Opera under Erich Kleiber. A 1929 Essen staging brought worse luck: the performing materials—including the only full score—apparently remained there, and were presumably destroyed before or during World War II. Nothing more was heard of the opera until 1967, when Gunther Schuller arranged an orchestral sequence (drawn mainly from the orchestral numbers) for ballet use. Four years later, he orchestrated the entire work in collaboration with Noam Sheriff, guided by the instrumental indications in the published 1926 vocal score. That version is used in the present recording, made during a concert performance at London's Barbican in January 2000, during the BBC's Weill centennial observations.

Goll's libretto centers on a beautiful woman named Dejanira (soprano) and the three men in her life, identified, in expres-

sionist style, only by labels: The Husband (bass), Yesterday's Lover (baritone), and Tomorrow's Admirer (tenor). When they arrive at a hotel in the Italian lake district, she grows weary of them and their failure to understand her. A couple of fishermen (tenor and bass) utter oracular pronouncements, implying an imminent death, which she seems to accept. The lovers importune her with offerings—first trivial, then grandiose—but she rejects them and eventually wades into the water of the lake and drowns herself. (The vocal forces also include an offstage soprano soloist and female chorus.) With its juxtapositions of extravagant emotionalism and mundane detail, its inconsequences and obscurities, the text might be labeled “disheveled”; it surely must have confused many early listeners. (Goll himself described it as “the fairy tale of life that recognizes itself only in death.”)

In a letter to the Berlin director, Weill referred to *Royal Palace* as “a serious revue” and, though his music is essentially continuous, it does include distinct “numbers.” Early on comes a ballet for busboys bearing “fantastic foods.” The three men's major offerings are presented as, respectively, a film (a luxury travelogue), a ballet in the heavens, and a pantomime in which the world revolves and Orpheus leads the world's creatures in adoration of the Deity. The finale, as Dejanira sinks into the lake, is a languorous tango (for the survivors and chorus) that eerily foreshadows the trance-like repetitions of the “Moritat” in *Die Dreigroschenoper*; its text comprises circulates Dejanira's name in all transpositions of its four syllables.

That final episode is perhaps the most successful part of the BBC performance, which for much of its length seems undercharacterized, both musically and verbally. At least two of the 1927 Berlin principals—Deli a Reinhardt (Dejanira) and Leo Schützendorf (The Husband)—can be heard on recordings from the period, and both of them shape and color words more vividly than the present performers (Preiser CD 89959, *Four Famous Sopranos of the Past*, includes Reinhardt's recordings of arias from *Freischütz*, *Walküre*, and *Meistersinger*; Preiser 89186

is devoted to Schützendorf, in repertory ranging from *Figaro* to *Boris Godunov*). Janice Watson's soprano moves from note to note less easily than Reinhardt's, and with less variety of color; Stephen Richardson is no match for Schützendorf in personality. Richard Coxon (Tomorrow's Admirer) offers a somewhat raspy tenor—but then my recollection of recordings by the original in this part, Carl Jöken, is that of a *Spieltenor*, not notably glamorous in tone either. The Old Fisherman's wobble is perhaps suitable to his age, but not to his oracular pronouncement. Most satisfactory among the modern principals is Ashley Holland (Yesterday's Lover), whose expansive phrasing of the speech beginning “Du meine letzte Barke” stands out for its generosity of emotion.

To be fair, all these performers (including chorus, orchestra and conductor) were in a sense creating the work from scratch, as at a premiere—but without the composer at hand to clarify intentions and style (made more elusive because of the opera's transitional character in Weill's work). Further, the concert circumstances, without scenery, stage direction, and action, inherently subordinate the theatrical aspects of performing to the musical ones. (The concert circumstances may account for some problematic aspects of the recorded sound. The opera's opening, with its piling-up of bell ostinato, begins too softly to be grasped at living-room listening levels, and the bells at the end are similarly hard to detect.)

At the Berlin premiere, *Royal Palace* was preceded by the premiere of the cantata *Der neue Orpheus*, sung by Reinhardt, with Rudolf Deman (concertmaster of the orchestra, and husband of the great Wagnerian soprano Frida Leider) as soloist. So it's fitting that the “filler” on this CD is that cantata, sung by Kathryn Harries with the violinist Michael Davis, and recorded at a concert the day after *Royal Palace*. Not surprisingly, given the work's greater familiarity, clarity of form, and consistency of style, *Der neue Orpheus* comes off much more effectively; indeed, the performance's energy and conviction easily make up for the occasional executive imprecision. (An earlier recording led by José Serebrier, with Carole Farley, Michael Guttman, and the Rheinische Philharmonie, is more evenly recorded but has less light and shade.)

David Hamilton
New York City



Video

The Seven Deadly Sins

Peter Sellars, director
Kent Nagano, conductor

Kultur D2904

Street Scene

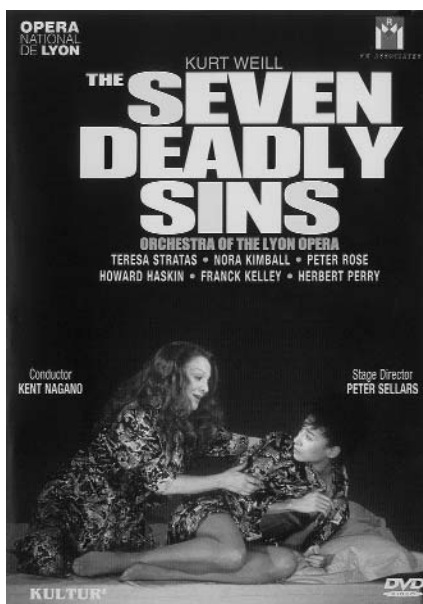
Francesca Zambello, stage director
James Holmes, conductor
Michael Boehme, video director

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Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Peter Zadek, stage director
Dennis Russell Davies, conductor
Brian Large, video director

Kultur D2078



As the “DVD revolution” progresses, sweeping aside videotape and good old-fashioned sound recordings made in studios, more and more titles are being made available in the new format, whether produced for DVD or remastered from videotape or film. Three landmark Kurt Weill productions have been released recently on DVD, providing a good opportunity to reassess each of the three works.

The oldest is *The Seven Deadly Sins*, from 1993, directed by the aging enfant terrible Peter Sellars and heavily influenced by his residency (at that time) in Los Angeles. The riots of 1992, which followed the acquittal of police officers accused of brutality in the Rodney King case, were fresh in the memory, and though Sellars’s Anna I and Anna II may say they’re in Memphis or Boston, they’re never very far from the intersection of Florence and Normandie and the aspirations (and frustrations) of inner-city Angelenos. The proximity of South Central Los Angeles to Hollywood works, as well: these Annas have set out not just to make money but to become *stars*.

So far, so good, but Sellars, who at this point had made very few films, opts for jittery, hand-held camerawork that may or may not have anything to do with Brecht’s alienation effect, but certainly does intrude on the viewer’s ability to absorb and appreciate the work of a talented cast. Between scenes, we get a silent, pointless, cinéma-vérité travelogue through South Central; during scenes, all of which appear to take place at the time of the riots, the camera constantly wanders away from whatever ought to be the center of one’s attention. Most likely it’s not dramaturgy but simple ego that dictates Sellars’s approach, since his camera goes wildest whenever he (as stage director) must cede control to the choreographer, Donald Byrd. It’s impossible to tell what Anna II (Nora Kimball) is doing whenever she dances: Sellars’s camera never lets us get a good look. He won’t relinquish power even by allowing the viewer to focus on his Anna I.

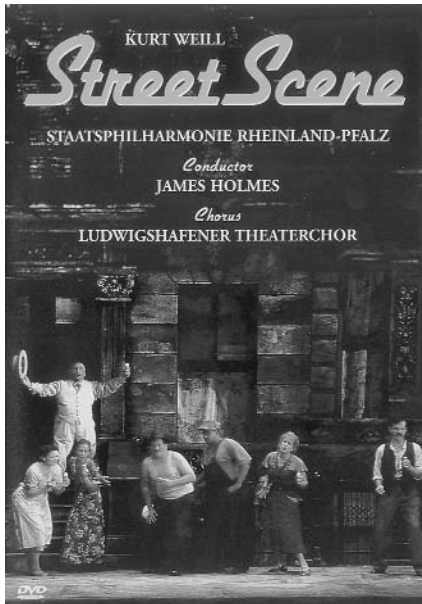
That’s a missed opportunity, because Anna I is embodied by Teresa Stratas, whose special connection to Weill (and to Lenya, the first Anna I), whose own path to stardom, and whose interpretive gifts should have made this a historic role assumption. The Canadian soprano had intended to sing Anna earlier, and though this remains her only attempt at the part, her musical and (especially) her dramatic characterizations are fully considered.

She’d lived with this part for a long time, and many of the ideas she’d developed independently do make it to Sellars’s screen. Her singing isn’t always fresh—she was fifty-five at the time—but it’s consistently attuned to text and context, spiked with startling insights. Bouncing around, as Sellars requires her to do, doesn’t enhance the fluidity of her vocal line. (Some sections of the show are dubbed to pre-recorded tracks; others seem to have been sung on-camera.) It’s impressive work nevertheless, and Stratas’s white-hot fury contrasts beautifully with Kimball’s cool serenity. They contrast interestingly in other ways, too: age, skin color, height. The all-American cast performs gamely under the sterling baton of Kent Nagano, leading the orchestra of the Opéra National de Lyon. If only Sellars would let us watch the show!

Stage director Francesca Zambello is the diva at the center of *Street Scene* (1995), in a production from Houston Grand Opera, Berlin’s Theater des Westens, and the Ludwigshafen Theater im Pfalzbau, recorded at the latter. Zambello enjoys a reputation (sometimes deserved) for the psychological detail she brings to the blocking of an opera chorus, even in vast works such as Prokofiev’s *War and Peace*. Thus *Street Scene* is catnip to her: an opera in which every member of the chorus has a name and a history! Her stage is busy with sharply delineated characters and well-motivated comings and goings, though television director Michael Boehme cuts away to details just when we need to see the bigger pictures; he interrupts “Lonely House” with tracking shots of the set. (As if we can’t tell that Sam Kaplan is singing about a house.) Apart from a few pick-up shots, his cameras are stationed in the orchestra pit for most of the show, giving the performers a disconcertingly distended appearance. And the microphones seem to have been placed in the back of the theater. It’s remarkably clumsy direction.

Soprano Ashley Putnam, who brought luster to leading roles at New York City Opera in the late 1970s and 1980s, is a memorable Anna Murrant, with a wistful, frail beauty and limpid vocal tone. Much less tough than others I’ve seen, Putnam’s Anna has been beaten down by her marriage and her circumstances; her only remaining joys are in her children and in her doomed affair with the milkman. Baritone Marc Embree is suitably brutish as her husband, and young Teri Hansen is a revelation as their daughter, Rose: feisty

and intelligent, physically lovely and possessed of a radiant soprano voice, she is very much her mother's daughter, and her scenes and songs reflect a desperate, honestly justified desire not to grow up like Anna. As Sam Kaplan, tenor Kip Wilborn is the weakest actor in the cast, but he sings gorgeously.



Major roles seem to be given almost exclusively to Americans, with the exception of dancer Anita Vidnovic (Mae Jones); her "Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed," opposite Danny Costello, is much too balletic, as choreographed by Denny Berry. (It's a jitterbug, not *Swan Lake*, for Pete's sake.) James Holmes leads the orchestra of the Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz in a commendably idiomatic reading of the score, which, more than ever before, struck this viewer as a vaudeville revue, not a Broadway opera: a series of specialty numbers performed by accent comics. Still, when the big operatic moments come, Holmes slides them in seamlessly, and Zambello's grasp of the drama is sure. The DVD offers no subtitles, though, making it difficult to follow the lyrics, even for someone who knows the score.

The 1998 production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* brought Weill's music to the Salzburg Festival. These were the twilight days of the administration of Gérard Mortier, whose chief object as Intendant seemed to be to shatter every assumption his audiences brought to Salzburg. This infuriated almost everybody—his farewell production was a *Die*

Fledermaus so intentionally offensive that it nearly provoked riots. This *Mahagonny*, though laden with skin and sin, is bold in another way: the music of a Jewish composer in a bastion of Aryan art, a cheerfully socialistic study in a supremely bourgeois context, a work that some people (still!) don't believe is an opera. Happily, most of this background is kept off camera, and the production, as seen on video, remains a flawed but interesting specimen. Surely Dennis Russell Davies takes the score seriously, and if his conducting doesn't quite manage the Mozartian touch one might ask, especially in Salzburg, it would in any case be difficult to hear lighter, more detailed orchestral textures in this DVD's rather muffled audio presentation.

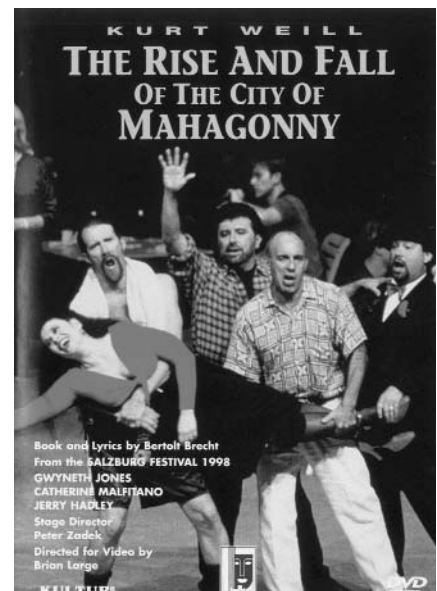
Peter Zadek's staging lacks an original point of view, but it's brisk and efficient, and very seldom dull. The cast, mostly comprised of native English-speakers, is led by two formidable divas: sopranos Catherine Malfitano (Jenny) and Gwyneth Jones (Begbick). They create an unusual partnership, in which the procuress is more seductive than the whore. This Jenny is exceptionally cold, menacing; this Begbick startlingly sexy, glamorous. Malfitano, who often has sung Weill's music and who has made a specialty of it in recent seasons (following this production, she went on to play Anna Murrant in *Chicago* and Anna I in *Cincinnati*), sings the present role with plenty of power and a hard, cutting edge that matches her physical characterization. (I know we're not supposed to care too much about such things in Epic Theatre, but it's difficult to see how a Jenny so intimidating could actually make a living.) Malfitano's voice has lost most of its former bloom, and the toughness of most of her recent characterizations (such as Emilia Marty and Kundry) can become generic, routine, even dull, as it sometimes is here. Jones is a less familiar face on American stages and screens these days, giving her an advantage over Malfitano. Though the remnants of Jones' singing voice are few, and hardly appealing, she commands the stage; silver-maned and chic, she's simply irresistible.

Jerry Hadley's tenor also was showing its age by the time this production was taped. It was always far too small to sing the role of Jimmy Mahoney in most opera houses, yet it's clear he's thrilled by the opportunity to sing it in the comfortable proportions of Salzburg's Festspielhaus. His Jimmy is an entirely decent fellow—too much so—but his enthusiasm is infec-

tious. The supporting cast includes such welcome artists as Wilbur Pauley (Trinity Moses), Dale Duesing (Pennybank Bill), and, most impressively, Udo Holdorf (Jakob Schmidt).

Again, the sound quality here is a far cry from that of a studio recording; one has the feeling of hearing the performance from inside the theater—in rather poor seats. The English subtitles resort to the use of a singing translation, which frequently strays very far from the meaning of the original texts. This DVD, like most classical-music titles, as well as the others under consideration here, offers no "extra features" of the kind that home viewers of Hollywood movies on DVD have come to expect. Thus, despite their individual merits, none of these releases seems destined to supplant audio recordings or to join the permanent DVD collections of any but the most ardent (and thorough) enthusiasts.

William V. Madison
New York City



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