

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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Magical Night at the Royal Opera House

FEATURES

Going Home: *Lost in the Stars* Returns to Its Roots in South Africa

Anatomy of an Adaptation: Marc Blitzstein, Kurt Weill, and *The Threepenny Opera*

Blitzstein Lives On: Tributes to Marc Blitzstein

IN THIS ISSUE

3 Editors' Note

FEATURES

4 Going Home: *Lost in the Stars* Returns to Its Roots in South Africa
Tazewell Thompson

7 Anatomy of an Adaptation: Marc Blitzstein, Kurt Weill, and *The Threepenny Opera*

9 Blitzstein Lives On: Tributes to Marc Blitzstein

REVIEWS

Performances

13 *Magical Night*
Royal Opera House
Rodney Milnes

14 *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*
Israeli Opera
Ori Leshman

15 *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*
Wiener Staatsoper
Larry L. Lash

17 *Die sieben Todsünden*
Komische Oper Berlin
Jürgen Schebera

Recordings

18 Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra, op. 12
on Deutsche Grammophon
Andreas Eichhorn

Books

19 *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform*
by Stephen Hinton
Philip Gossett

NEWS

20 2012 Lotte Lenya Competition

22 Kurt Weill Edition Releases *Johnny Johnson*

23 Foundation News

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

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Cover photo: Summoned by the Toy Fairy, the toys come to life in *Magical Night* at London's Royal Opera House. Review on p. 13. Photo: Tristram Kenton.

EDITORS' NOTE

This issue of the Kurt Weill Newsletter marks a number of changes. Elmar Juchem, after eleven outstanding years as editor, has stepped down in order to focus on his “day job” as managing editor of the Kurt Weill Edition. Elmar has set a high standard for the Newsletter, one that we will try to meet as we take over the reins.

Regular readers will notice some other changes instantly. After almost thirty years of black-and-white photos, color! We’ve used the same design for fifteen years; now Kate has prepared a brand-new layout. The number of pages drops from 32 to 24 with this issue, although on occasion we may expand future issues as needed.

Those missing eight pages, “Topical Weill,” contained a summary of Foundation news, reprinted review excerpts, a list of new publications, and other items of interest. The Newsletter will continue to cover Foundation news, but we have moved most of our other news coverage to our website, www.kwf.org, where we will provide timely information about current and forthcoming performances (including links to features, reviews, and media), significant new publications, and Foundation events. In collaboration with our web designer, Michael LeBlanc, we have come up with a bright new look for the site—including but not limited to a slide show on the home page—and added a “News” area (which may be found now on our top menu) with links to current news, press releases, the performance calendar, and an e-news archive. If you haven’t signed up yet for Kurt Weill Foundation e-news, you can do so from any page on our site. These monthly bulletins are another great way to keep up with what’s going on in the world of Kurt Weill. (Visit our Facebook page as well: www.facebook.com/KurtWeillFoundation.)

One other addition to our site points to one of the features in this issue. We have added a Marc Blitzstein page as the result of a generous gift from Stephen E. Davis, Marc Blitzstein’s nephew. As of 1 January 2012, Mr. Davis donated his 50% share of Blitzstein’s literary and musical copyrights to the Foundation. Of course, Blitzstein’s adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* helped launch the renewal of Weill’s American reputation back in the fifties and remains popular, so our longstanding association with Blitzstein has just become stronger, to our mutual advantage. We will be expanding the Blitzstein area of the site in order to provide information about publications, recordings, and performance rights and to encourage new recognition of this under-appreciated composer and theater artist.

We couldn’t think of a better way to get the Blitzstein ball rolling than to ask friends and family members, composers, performers, conductors, and scholars to provide homages to Blitzstein—the man, the musician, the politically committed artist—that serve as a stirring reminder that his name and work remain alive and well. Along with the tributes we provide an account of Weill’s and Blitzstein’s relationship, which leads into a discussion of Blitzstein’s *Threepenny* lyrics. And we are elated to lead off with director Tazewell Thompson’s account of the joys and challenges of staging *Lost in the Stars* in Cape Town, South Africa, last fall. He’ll be at the helm again this summer when the Glimmerglass Festival presents it on the main stage.

As we go to press, we have just learned that the great German dance critic and Weill champion Horst Koegler has passed away. We look forward to acknowledging his manifold contributions to the Newsletter and to Weill reception in the Fall issue.

Kate Chisholm and Dave Stein

IN THE WINGS

Highlights of upcoming performances:

Sieben Songs von Weill / Die sieben Todsünden

Komische Oper Berlin

Barrie Kosky, director; Kristiina Poska, conductor; Dagmar Manzel, Anna I.

9, 13 June; 2 July

Weill songs

Sydney Opera House

Deborah Voigt, soprano. “An American Songbook.”

24 June

Zaubernacht

Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Ravinia Festival

James Conlon, conductor; T. Daniel Productions, staging; Janai Brugger, soprano.

19 July

Lost in the Stars

Opéra éclaté

Olivier Desbordes, director; Dominique Trottein, conductor.

French tour, 19 July 2012 – 12 April 2013

Lost in the Stars

Glimmerglass Festival, Cooperstown, NY

See p. 6 for details.

22 July – August 25

Die sieben Todsünden

Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Bregenz Festival

HK Gruber, conductor; Gun-Brit Barkmin, Anna I.

6 August

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Wiener Staatsoper

Jérôme Deschamps, director; Ingo Metzmacher, conductor.

22, 27, 30 September

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Teatro Real, Madrid

Alex Ollé, Carlus Padrissa, directors; Pablo Heras-Casado, conductor.

6 November

To learn about the many other Weill performances coming up around the world, view the performance calendar at www.kwf.org.

Going Home

Lost in the Stars Returns to Its Roots in South Africa

American theater and opera director Tazewell Thompson traveled “Thousands of Miles” to direct *Lost in the Stars* with the Cape Town Opera in November 2011. In a deeply personal account created as a production diary for the Glimmerglass Festival (which will present the co-production this summer starring Eric Owens; see p. 6), Thompson reflects on his experience working with South Africans on the Weill-Anderson musical—based on Alan Paton’s powerful social indictment of apartheid, *Cry, the Beloved Country*—after so many years of struggle and change.



Tazewell Thompson

Dress Rehearsal

The dress rehearsal with orchestra went well. It was a fascinating experience which I shall not forget. Some lines that resonated very strongly in South Africa will not have the same impact in the USA. I loved hearing the audience’s reactions to the cultural and political content. I love the cast; they worked hard for me. They connect with the material in a way that is personal and meaningful to them. It is the story of their people, their families. Their native accents are at times hard to understand, but there is no mistaking their commitment and passion.

The invited audience was a mixture: many white Afrikaaners, a huge number of Muslim women (heads covered), Zulus, and an assortment of brown- and black-skinned people. It was a packed house.

James Jarvis, the white father who supports apartheid, was not booed or hissed, but his lines were met with vocal grumbling and sounds of broken-hearted recognition that came deep from the pit of historical hurts. Absalom, the young black man accused of murder, tore through the audience’s emotions. His mother Grace’s final walk from the chapel was pathetic and tragic. Patrick Tikolo as Reverend Stephen Kumalo (Absalom’s father) continued to struggle with some moments, but really delivered in the title song, and in the very challenging “Soliloquy” (“O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!”) he was outstanding.

Irina, Absalom’s girlfriend, singing my two favorite songs in the score—“Trouble Man” and “Stay Well”—was in excellent form; all the hours and weeks spent coaching her to deliver lines onstage (her first time ever) and in English (her third language) were magnificently rewarded. She was terrific. Her scenes with Stephen and Absalom were emotionally explosive and right on

target. Her line, “Nobody lives alone in Sophiatown,” caused lots of recognition murmurs.

Gloria Bosman as Linda (a girlfriend of Absalom’s cousin who sings in a shebeen in the shantytown) stopped the show cold with “Who’ll Buy?”. She was a unique mixture of hilarity and sexiness. The audience stood and cheered when she came out for her call. The lines about the law and justice during the mock trial that follows her song had the audience commenting approvingly with laughter and applause.

The actor playing Absalom is brilliant. His passionate speech to Irina about seeking a better life outside the shantytowns is riveting and profoundly convincing. It is all the more poignant because you know his dreams are a lost cause. His plaintive outburst

in the courtroom scene brought tears to many in the audience, including me. He has a sound in his voice that reeks of frustration and years of dashed hopes. It cuts right through. He was roundly cheered at his curtain call. No actor in America will equal that performance.

John Kumalo, Stephen Kumalo’s brother, the political firebrand, was excellent tonight and the audience was clearly in his corner. His line, “The son of my mother” was greeted with loud laughter. At intermission, I asked why. Michael Mitchell, set and costume designer, and Lesley Manim, dialect coach, told me that it is a common South African phrase among siblings meaning “the favorite son.” His lines to Stephen: “You’re the white man’s dog, trained to bark and keep us in order” and “Then why do you wear their Anglican clothes and read their Testament,” were met with a mixture of laughter and applause. In Act Two, John Kumalo’s explanation of how and why one should lie in court and play the “justice game” was delivered clearly and strongly, and he was rewarded with laughter and a round of applause.

“What an extraordinary opportunity, as an American black man, to direct *Lost in the Stars* in the country of my ancestors with these phenomenal performers, who are passionate, fearless, unselfconscious, possess innate dignity, and can only act truth. Their main objective is to commit art.”

target. Her line, “Nobody lives alone in Sophiatown,” caused lots of recognition murmurs.

A big surprise was the reaction to the train song. The lyrics:

White man go to Johannesburg—
He come back, he come back.
Black man go to Johannesburg—
Never come back, never come back!

There was loud laughter each time the lyric was repeated. But later, during “Cry, the Beloved Country,” many members of the audience lost control and wept audibly.

PHOTO: JOHN SNELLING



A member of the congregation sings “A Bird of Passage.”

The First Three Performances

On opening night, the house was three-quarters full. It was said some Afrikaaners canceled, not wanting to see themselves portrayed in a shameful historical light. There was a mixed crowd of races in attendance. Our lead actor, Patrick Tikolo, was terribly nervous. He was sometimes ahead of the music or slightly behind, and he kept walking in and out of his light. In the last moments of Act One, he pulled it together and performed a powerful title song to close the act. I dashed backstage and the poor man was a sweaty mess. I had wardrobe take his suit and quickly put it in the dryer and press it. Act Two: he rose to the occasion and was very effective to the end.

Throughout the first act the company was a very tight, supportive ensemble. They could see their fellow actor was stumbling and they took everything up a notch without pushing. It was terrific. Linda in the shebeen scene again stopped the show with her song; Absalom’s scene with Irina received applause as the tin corrugated curtain came in just before Irina sang “Trouble Man,” which received a huge ovation. Act Two was almost flawless. It is the more powerful of the two acts. “Cry, the Beloved Country” was absolutely incredible. A standing ovation started halfway through the curtain calls and there were many bows before the curtain came down.

There was a packed house for the second performance. The audience was all white save for eight blacks. (I counted from the back.) Excellent show all around. There were lots of cheers, bravos and a standing ovation for the curtain calls.

The next day, a good-sized crowd attended my pre-opera talk. For the third performance, there was a good mix in the audience: 75% white; 25% black in a three-quarters full house. Very good show. Lots of laughter in the shebeen scene. Big applause

after Irina’s two songs. Strong reception after “Cry, the Beloved Country.” During intermission, I met Cleveland O. Thomas, who played Absalom to Grace Bumbry’s Irina in St. Louis many years ago.

I am dreading closing the run tonight. I will miss all of the cast and crew members. The whole experience of hearing and seeing this musical drama played straight from their fervent, committed hearts will stay with me a long time.

Closing Night: 26 November 2011

At 6:15 p.m. I leave the hotel and set out for the Artscape orchestra rehearsal room to give my pre-opera talk. The winds are back. Actually, they had never left from the night before. All night long the windows of my suite had rattled and I could see the whipped-up ocean waters tossing barges and boats about, bending down the trees, and raising whirlwinds of debris everywhere. As I venture forth this evening, I am really fighting the winds, more ferocious even than last night, so powerful that I am thrown to the pavement even while holding onto the bent sidewalk poles, constructed and placed for just such displays of natural temperament. These gale force winds are welcomed by Cape Town residents from late November through early February. They are known as Cape Doctor Winds because the locals believe they blow away pollution, sins, and pestilence, cleaning the air for the rest of the year. You find a wide variety of plants, trees and vegetation in the city due to the seeds hurled by the winds from all parts of Cape Town that have pollinated and rooted throughout the downtown area. They say many a hopeful lover will tear up sheets of paper bearing the name of their intended written over and over and toss them into the winds, hoping one will blow into the window or doorstep of the one they long for. There is no love or help for me tonight as I brave the relentless, terrifying velocity of the winds that are behaving like a gigantic trapped tiger caught in the bowl of the city between Table Mountain and the South Atlantic Ocean.



Stephen, Grace and Irina pray for Absalom.

PHOTO: ABBY ROOD



Absalom stands trial for the murder of Arthur Jarvis.

PHOTO: ABBY RODD

“Today, I revisit *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Lost in the Stars* with a deeper sense of how the novel and the opera magnify how far we, as a race of ever hopeful people, have come. Both the book and the opera have become more significant to me as a great testament of the power of art and its ability to capture moral conditions then and now.”

Eventually, I reach my destination; clothes all askew, with bruises and scratches on my face and arms. The orchestra room is empty. The chorus room down the hall, where the company warms up, is empty as well. Am I too late, or too early? Panicked, I run up two flights to the lobby level and I can see the last few patrons being ushered into the theater. Now I remember! The curtain for the final performance goes up at 6:30 p.m., earlier than on previous nights.

The house is packed and overflowing with patrons, many sitting on the steps leading down to the orchestra pit. In the center of the house there are rows and rows of young black teenagers dressed in white; the girls in white dresses with white wraps around their heads and the boys in white shirts and black ties. I ask them who they are during intermission; they tell me they are a group of fifty-five Anglican students from one of the townships. Many of them carry paperbacks of *Cry, the Beloved Country* in their hands; the book is part of their curriculum. They all listened to a recording of *Lost in the Stars* in preparation for this evening’s performance. While they are excited to meet someone from “New York City, America,” they are more thrilled to meet a black man in charge of directing the production onstage. Throughout all the weeks of rehearsal, I could never get the company to call me Tazewell, or Taz; it was always Mr. Thompson, Sir, or Mr. Director! So formal in their culture and so proud of my position as a black man director, their first.

This final performance is especially rich, full-throated and powerful. Knowing that this is the company’s last time to sing and act their roles, and they don’t have to save their voices for another performance, everyone is really letting loose and tearing down the walls of the Artscape for their family and friends in the audience. It is extraordinarily thrilling.

The scenes and songs are connecting in a way that seems even more meaningful tonight. There are the same reactions (bigger than ever) to lines about never returning from Johannesburg and John Kumalo’s disdain for his brother’s religious collar. The pain and humiliation of a father seeing his son in jail accused of murdering a white is extremely palpable in the house; the shebeen scene with Gloria’s song, “Who’ll Buy,” has the audience clapping and finger-snapping to the rhythm of the song; the title song receives an amazing round of cheers and applause as our

corrugated curtain comes in for the intermission. The crowd loves Irina all through the show. Her unfortunate plight touches them in a deeply emotional way—it really hits home. Her two songs receive long ovations.

Act Two: The Leader’s song, “The Wild Justice,” draws new reactions from the house: whispers and sounds of disgruntlement, lots of head-shaking. Kumalo’s operatic “Soliloquy” is robust and searing. However, the most incredible moment of all three nights happens during the trial scene. When Absalom Kumalo receives his death sentence, there are screams and anguished cries from the audience; a few patrons stand up and jeer at the announcement. As Absalom is led off to his cell, a woman waves her white handkerchief in the air and makes a tearful sound in her native language.

I have had so many wonderful and fulfilling experiences in my career; travels across the country and overseas, exploring the human condition through the great works composed and written for the stage. It will be a very long time, if ever, that something will come along to top my time in Cape Town, rehearsing and directing the poet-playwright Maxwell Anderson and the genius Kurt Weill’s *Lost in the Stars* in South Africa. I thank The Kurt Weill Foundation, The Sterling Clark Foundation, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Francesca Zambello for helping to make this all possible, for bringing me home to the land of my ancestors and connecting me to a people and culture that is my own. And the winds come at night to bring me back and remind me.

I rejoice that the theater exists as a means for writers like Anderson, together with composers like Weill, to work together with actors, singers and other artists and connect themselves to our world, pierce through its density, to show to our fellow humans something of its mystery and violence and prejudices and terror and pity and capacity to change.

The **Glimmerglass Festival** in Cooperstown, New York, presents ***Lost in the Stars*** this summer featuring Artist-in-Residence Eric Owens as The Reverend Stephen Kumalo and Sean Pannikar as the Leader.

Performance dates: 22 and 28 July; 3, 7, 11, 16, 18, 25 August
 Director: Tazewell Thompson
 Conductor: John DeMain
 Sets and Costumes: Michael Mitchell
 Choreographer: Anthony Salatino

Please visit www.glimmerglass.org for more details.

Anatomy of an Adaptation

Marc Blitzstein, Kurt Weill,
and *The Threepenny Opera*

Kurt Weill and Marc Blitzstein met for the first time in 1934, when Weill was in France working on *Der Weg der Verheißung*. Blitzstein's general opinion of Weill's music up to that time, offered in lectures, reviews, and private correspondence, was unfavorable, even dismissive. In 1933, he condemned "Weill's super-bourgeois ditties (stilted 'Otchi Tchornayas' and 'Road-to-Mandalays') harmonized with a love of distortion and dissonance truly academic." Yet Weill reported that at their first meeting, Blitzstein offered to help translate and adapt *Der Weg* for the New York production. Weill may not have been aware of Blitzstein's judgment of some of his previous scores, but he was dubious all the same: "I don't know Mr. Blitzstein well enough to judge whether he could do the work. He seems more of a writer about music than a musician." Shortly after that meeting, Blitzstein wrote, "Weill has one theatre-attack. It has long range communicability, and sufficient variety within its own curious limitations." In January 1936, after Weill arrived in the U.S., Blitzstein compared him unfavorably to Eisler, which must have rankled: "Weill is flaccid (he wants to entertain); Eisler has spine and nerves (he wants to educate)."

Blitzstein was about to change his tune, however. On 22 June 1936, he asked Weill for the score of *Die sieben Todsünden* with a view to arranging a performance (no reply from Weill has survived). The next month, as Weill worked with the Group Theatre to prepare *Johnny Johnson*, Blitzstein was there as well, learning about Weill's theory and practice of musical theater just before he began work in earnest on *The Cradle Will Rock*. When *Johnny* opened that November, Blitzstein wired, "We need your success in America my hopes tonight," and he praised the show in *Modern Music*: "I have written some harsh things in the past about Kurt Weill and his music. I wish now to write a few good things. He hasn't changed, I have . . . [*Johnny Johnson* has] shown me values I didn't know about before." Despite Blitzstein's change of heart, little evidence survives from the next fifteen years that the two were close or even much interested in each other's work, although Blitzstein did send a few more opening-night telegrams, and Weill gave a polite but negative reply to a request to perform "Lost in the Stars" in 1942, when the song was still unknown. The fact that Weill and Blitzstein shared some esthetic goals and strategies for reaching them, and even the same birthday, does not seem to have brought them closer together.

Late in 1949, Weill's *Lost in the Stars* and Blitzstein's *Regina* opened within days of each other on Broadway. Maurice Abravanel, Weill's pupil in Berlin and conductor of five of his Broadway



The MGM recording session of *The Threepenny Opera*. (L to R) Carmen Capalbo, Stanley Chase, Marc Blitzstein, Marga Richter (seated), Lotte Lenya, and Ed Cole of MGM.

PHOTO: JERRY SALTZBERG

shows, had been hired to conduct *Regina*, much to Weill's dismay. Lys Symonette, Weill's rehearsal pianist, recalled that Weill said of Blitzstein at the time, "He's a better writer than a composer. Now he wants to translate *Dreigroschenoper*." Blitzstein recalled:

I started first by doing one single song. I used to be giving some lectures, and I would do this particular song . . . and audiences . . . would always say, "What does it mean?" . . . and I decided, "Why shouldn't I let them know what it means by making a kind of translation of it?" And so I performed a translation, and being by this time a friend of Kurt Weill's, I called him up on the phone and said, "Would you like to listen to a translation I've made of the 'Pirate Jenny' number from your *Dreigroschenoper*?" He said, "Sure, sing it to me right now." And so I did, and he began beating with his finger at the other side to keep me on the tempo. When I finished, he said, "I wish you could see the reams of translations I have of this whole work, which I have simply rejected. Why don't you do the whole thing? You seem to be the right person for it." (from an interview broadcast on the "Polly & Jerry Show," WABC-TV, ca. May 1954)

The exact date of the telephone call is not known, although Blitzstein later said he made it in January 1950. He told this story several times; in the fullest version, he recalled that he returned to the project only after Weill's death in April 1950, starting with "Solomon Song." "The thing was getting under my skin. By that time I had reached the point of no return and had to do it all" (*New York Herald-Tribune*, 7 March 1954). In Weill's absence, it was up to Lotte Lenya to encourage his endeavors, and the rest is theater history.

Blitzstein's adaptation of *Threepenny* was first performed at Brandeis University, 14 June 1952, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. It opened off-Broadway at the Theater de Lys 10 March 1954, and the cast recording appeared just a month or two later. MGM took a risk by agreeing to record an off-Broadway

TANGO-BALLAD

show, and they were very nervous about some of the more risqué lyrics. As a result, the only available recording of Blitzstein's adaptation was compromised from the start; the oft-heard accusation that Blitzstein softened Brecht's original lyrics derives from the recorded version, which is quite different from what audiences heard at the Theater de Lys. An MGM executive demanded that every instance of "hell," "damn," and "ass" be excised, which caused Blitzstein to do a frantic rewrite on the spot at the recording session, substituting other words or simply leaving out the offending ones, forcing singers to alter the accustomed rhythm. Some numbers, including "Pirate Jenny," escaped relatively unscathed. But other numbers did not fare so well. "Mack the Knife"

lost two stanzas outright, since there was no way to disguise the sexual violence of Sloppy Sadie with "a knife wound up her thigh," or Little Suzie's "rape down by the harbor." Mrs. Peachum's lines, "You warn us you're about to lift our dresses, to see they don't fall down for lack of pins" in "How to Survive" became, "You warn us with appropriate caresses that virtue, humble virtue, always wins." In the case of the "Wedding Song," the groom's line, "I only need a certain part of her" had to be destroyed and recast as "Who knows if this will last for me and her?" The most sustained example of Blitzstein's rewriting wizardry comes from the recorded version of "Tango-Ballad," a cheerful chronicle of love and violence between a prostitute and her pimp.

STAGE VERSION

Mack: There was a time, and now it's all gone by,
When we two lived together, she and I.
The way we were was just the way to be.
I covered her, and she took care of me.
And that arrangement seemed to work perfectly.
A sailor would appear; I got out of bed
Went out and had a beer, he crawled in instead.
And when he paid his bill, back in bed I'd climb,
And say: Goodnight my friend, thank you, any time.
And so we lived, me and my little mouse,
In that snug two-by-four where we kept house.

Jenny: That was a time, and now it's all gone by,
When we were poor and happy, he and I.
And when the night no customer would bring,
And we would fight, he'd yell: Give me back my ring!
A ring is nice no doubt. It's been done without.
But when he drank too much, I'd get kind of grim,
And shout the house down how I stood a clown like him.
And then he'd turn around in bed and bite my arm,
And I would kick him in the teeth, meaning no harm.
It was so sweet to be his little spouse,
In that foul two-by-four where we played house.

Jenny, Mack: Oh, happy time, and now it's all gone by,
Until we quit each other, you and I.

Jenny: We had our love by day, and don't you smirk.

Mack: The nights, I say, were strictly meant for work.
It's better at night, they say. It ain't bad by day.

Jenny: And then, one time, I felt inside a little stir.

Mack: It looked like soon I might be taking care of her.

Jenny: Did you suppose that it was all my private plan?
You left me flat!

Mack: Well, I just ain't a family man.

Jenny, Mack: We locked the door, and each commenced to roam.
Goodbye, sweet two-by-four that we called home.

RECORDED VERSION

There was a time, and now it's all gone by,
When we two lived together, she and I.
The way we were was just the way to be.
I cared for her, and she took care of me—
And that arrangement seemed to work perfectly.
The milkman rang the bell; I got out of bed,
I opened up her purse, paid him what he said.
I'd have a glass of milk, back in bed I'd climb.
You understand she was out working all this time.
And so we lived, me and my little mouse
In that snug two-by-four where we kept house.

That was a time, and now it's all gone by,
When we were poor but happy, he and I.
But when the day would bring no job to me
He'd curse and say, "How lazy can you be?"
I let him huff and puff; I'd worked long enough.
But when he drank too much, I'd get kind of grim
And shout the house down how I stood a clown like him.
And then he'd turn around and try to bite my arm,
And I would kick him in the teeth, meaning no harm.
It was so sweet to be his little spouse
In that foul two-by-four where we played house.

Oh, happy time, and now it's all gone by,
Until we quit each other, you and I.

You stayed in bed all day, and don't you smirk.

You know we said that you'd do all the work.
Now sleep's for the night, they say; it ain't bad by day.

So then I had my fill[?], so I wouldn't stir

It looked like soon I might be taking care of her.

You'd think a woman had a right to have one gripe.
You left me flat!

Well, I just ain't the workin' type.

We locked the door, and each commenced to roam.
Goodbye, sweet two-by-four that we called home.

Blitzstein Lives On

To celebrate the Kurt Weill Foundation's acquisition of a share of Blitzstein's literary and musical copyrights (see p. 3), we requested tributes to Blitzstein from composers, conductors, performers, family members, and scholars. Nearly fifty years after his death, it's high time to recall his musical and theatrical innovations, his inimitable style, and his passionate political engagement.

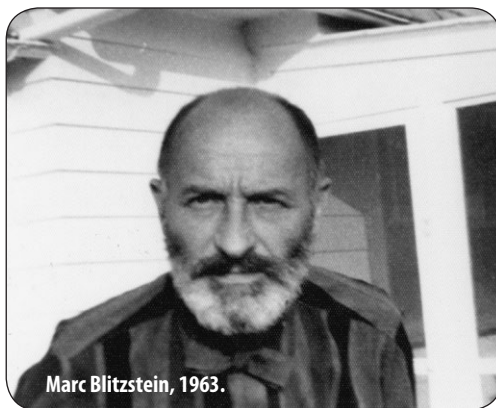
Prologue

Howard Pollack, author of forthcoming biography

Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) is remembered today primarily for his English adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* and for two operas for which he wrote both the libretto and the music, namely, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) and *Regina* (1949, adapted from Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes*). These three stage works might well be Blitzstein's greatest accomplishments. But they hardly represent the full extent of his output, which includes ten musical dramas, three ballets, ten incidental scores, seven film scores, and various songs and concert works.

Although not everything in this impressive catalog commands equal attention, little-known treasures can be found throughout. Aaron Copland, who knew Blitzstein's oeuvre better than most, greatly admired, for example, the ballet *Cain*, the film score *Surf and Seaweed*, and especially the opera *No for an Answer*, which he seems to have regarded more highly than either *The Cradle* or *Regina*. Another of Blitzstein's friends, composer Ned Rorem, particularly liked the song cycle *From Marion's Book* to poems by E.E. Cummings ("a happier blend of poet and composer I don't know," agreed David Diamond). Some listeners with a taste for the avant-garde have singled out for commendation the composer's early piano and chamber pieces, while aficionados of the Broadway musical long have found his score to *Juno* particularly appealing.

Since the composer's death in 1964, but especially in the course of the last few decades, a number of such novelties have been revived successfully, including the theater pieces *The Harpies*, *I've Got the Tune*, *No for an Answer*, and *Juno*, as well as the *Airborne Symphony* and *This Is the Garden* for chorus and orchestra. Recent years have also witnessed well-received premieres of works never performed during the composer's lifetime, including his Piano Concerto (in its full orchestral version), Orchestra Variations, and translation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*. (Still other compositions, like the severe choral opera *The Condemned*, await a first performance.) The largely enthusiastic response to these works suggests that the full measure of Blitzstein's achievement has yet to be taken.



Marc Blitzstein, 1963.

PHOTO: STEPHEN DAVIS

He had powerful forearms, square muscular musician's hands, the cuticles bitten raw. He used excessive force to deal with mail, with drinks—lunging at the work, spilling and mopping up, tearing. Time tormented him. He read his wristwatch every minute, lit a cigarette, thought better of it, put it out.

— Christopher Davis, Blitzstein's nephew

Remembering Blitzstein

Stephen Davis, Blitzstein's nephew, and his wife Joyce

After Marc's wife Eva died, his "family" was the Davis family, and he was closest to his beloved sister, Josephine (Jo) Davis. He virtually adopted his nephews, Christopher (Kit) and me (Stephen). Marc spent many summers with his adopted family in Brigantine, New Jersey. One of Marc and Jo's favorite pastimes was "sharing" the *New York Times* crossword every day. Marc would lie on his back on the floor or on the deck, hands behind his head and call out the answers sight unseen as Jo read the clues.

By 1956 the Davises began to include grandchildren. Marc was very solicitous of his new grand-nephews and -nieces. Usually there was an outside babysitter in attendance, and on one occasion, Marc happened to come by as the babysitter gave one of the children a sharp slap. Without consulting either a parent or a grandparent, he fired the sitter on the spot and led her unceremoniously to the door.

In 1963, after Marc returned from a sojourn in Italy, he arrived in Brigantine sporting a full black and white beard. Ed Davis and his grandson, Owen, conspired one afternoon to play a little trick on him. Ed purchased a fake beard and planted it on Owen's face. When Marc arrived for the daily cocktails, you can imagine the hilarity that ensued.

Christopher Davis, Blitzstein's nephew

Marc was at our Church Road house in Philadelphia in the winter of 1940 when he finished the workers' opera *No for an Answer*. He came down in the middle of the morning, unmoored, his job suddenly out of his hands. It was strange to see him at that hour. Since we had been trained to know how artists suffer in the composition of work, Marc's pleasure and the craziness of his mood jumped to Stephen and me and charged us too. It was during Christmas break from school. There had been storms and our street was filled with snow. [Our parents] Jo and Ed were in Florida. Marc needed to celebrate, so we cast around for a way. What did we want? He would buy us something. Finally we put on galoshes and overcoats—Marc would have had only his New

York street shoes—and walked to a variety store half a mile away where he bought us a sled. There was no longer any income from *The Cradle Will Rock*, which had brought him fame and some financial success. We were sure he had spent too much and felt guilty as well as pleased.

The same self-command that made him work at his art kept him distant from and in conflict with ordinary things. A trip to a store to buy the black ink for his music manuscripts, flints for his lighter, a sled for his nephews, became a perilous voyage—the saleswoman consulted as an expert, full information sought, comparisons made, the precise nature of this or that special function discovered, and so on—as if he had come from the moon that morning and had to make fast, intelligent sense of his new surroundings in order to survive.

Minna Curtiss, author

As a personality Marc embodied much of his Russian heritage. Sometimes he was a brooding or violent character out of Dostoyevsky. Sometimes he was as frivolous and high-spirited as one of Turgenev's gamblers at Baden-Baden. Always he was extravagant—in mood and in action. His generosity was excessive and imaginative. The pound of fresh caviar he would bring up to the country involved material sacrifices that I hated to think about. But we had fun being gluttonous.



Blitzstein with Leonard Bernstein, circa 1940.

Jamie Bernstein, daughter of Leonard and Felicia

My parents adored Marc. So close a friend was he that they appointed him my godfather when I was born. He immediately composed a piano piece in my honor, "To Baby Girl Bernstein"; I didn't even have a name yet.

In the summers, my parents were in the habit of making fairly elaborate home movies with story lines. In the summer of 1960, they made "Call Me Moses," their own silent Exodus epic. Marc was cast as the Pharaoh's whipmaster, lashing the slaves on the beach at Martha's Vineyard as they toiled to build the pyramids. Our family watches this movie every year at Passover. Somehow, as Marc laughs with silent-movie evil glee, burnished and handsome under the New England summer sun and melodramatically kissing his cat o' nine tails, he remains completely adorable.

Russell Nype, singer-actor

Marc Blitzstein's mother-in-law encouraged me to audition for *Regina* in 1949. I knew it was an opera, so I sang the Flower Song from *Carmen Jones*. Marc came down to the front of the theater and said, "O.k., I see you've got a few notes. Can you do a comedy number?" So I sang "When I'm Not Near the Girl I Love, I Love the Girl I'm Near" from *Finian's Rainbow*. And just like that, they signed me. Later Jane Pickens told me that they had auditioned seventy actors for my part, so I guess they were pretty worn out by that time and ready to take anyone who came along. That's how I got my first Broadway role. I've always had a warm place in my heart for Marc Blitzstein, who gave me my start on Broadway.

William Bolcom, composer

A half-century ago my longtime collaborator Arnold Weinstein and I were in New York working on our opera for actors *Dynamite Tonight*, to be produced at the Actors Studio Theater in December 1963. Several times we went to visit Marc Blitzstein before the opening to show him what we were doing, and he was always very wise and helpful in his counsel. We both loved his generosity and friendliness and good sense. I'm very grateful for the help and encouragement he gave the green 25-year-old I was then, and I'm sorry there wasn't an opportunity to get to know him better.

I still feel that one of the very strongest things Marc did was his English version of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht always insisted that translations of his work be translated to the culture as well, and Marc's version is the most successful I know of on two counts: it's idiomatic hip urban New Yorkese in language, and it was refitted to become a completely New York show.

Sheldon Harnick, lyricist

As a lyricist myself, I think I was most impressed by Marc Blitzstein's extraordinarily supple and effective lyrics for *The Threepenny Opera*. I saw the show several times and marveled at his accomplishment each time. I was fortunate enough to meet Marc Blitzstein only briefly in the mid-1950s, at the beginning of my career. A mutual friend had brought him to a backers' audition for a musical whose lyrics I had written, a spoof of the Horatio Alger tales. After the audition, he was wonderfully generous, telling me that I was "another Larry Hart in the making." I've never forgotten how moved I was by this much-needed encouragement from an artist whose work I admired so much.

Appreciating Blitzstein

Eric A. Gordon, author of *Mark the Music*

Beginning in the late 1970s I felt a calling, as insistent as "Mack the Knife," to write Marc Blitzstein's biography. What drove me for ten years were 1) a real love for his oeuvre and for the role he played as citizen-intellectual and artist; 2) a burning resentment that his work had been shoved aside for political and stylistic reasons; and 3) a personal need to vindicate him before the public, before his tracks got too cold. I had the benefit, during the 1980s, of direct contact with scores of people who knew him as family members, as colleagues, friends, co-workers, artists, and even as lovers.

My editor at St. Martin's said, "There will never be another biography of Blitzstein, so write what you feel needs to be there—what future readers and scholars will be seeking when they search out his life and work." Now I am in the peculiar and delicate situation of anticipating the appearance of a new biography of Blitzstein, by Howard Pollack, which will be out this summer. That a biographer with his résumé should be attracted to this subject is high tribute to a prodigious and complicated figure who occupied a unique niche in 20th-century American culture.

Foster Hirsch, author of *Kurt Weill on Stage*

As a composer-lyricist for the American musical theatre Marc Blitzstein, at 107, remains unique. Although there are echoes of the Brecht/Weill collaborations in his work, along with "quotations" from vaudeville, American folk and popular music, and Gilbert and Sullivan, among other sources, ultimately Blitzstein's voice is one of a kind: by turns raffish, acrid, ironic, and despite himself, lush and sentimental. His melodies could be as insinuating as those of Weill in his most beguiling mood. Like Weill, he was a crossover composer blending high and low, classical and populist; like Weill, he wanted to collapse the distance between the opera house and the commercial musical theatre with 'American' operas written in a native, homegrown idiom. But unlike Weill, he never enjoyed commercial acclaim.

The Cradle Will Rock, which may be Blitzstein's finest theater work, is especially bright, brimming with melodic and rhythmic ingenuity. Blitzstein's two adaptations, *Regina* and *Juno* (based on O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*) have solid books and fully-drawn characters. Collaborating with Joseph Stein, he came closest to a regulation, Broadway-style score with *Juno*, but even that subverts as much as it observes Broadway paradigms.

Blitzstein must have had mixed feelings about the fact that his most enduring fame derives from his adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*. Yet the vernacular, plain-spoken, distinctly American snap of his translations exhibits the same qualities that distinguish Blitzstein's lyrics for his own compositions.

John Mauceri, conductor

When I was asked to lead a Leonard Bernstein Festival in 1986 with the London Symphony, I thought it would be valuable to play Bernstein in the context of music that he had championed. With that in mind, one of the programs I conducted was Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*, juxtaposed with a symphonic suite from *Candide*. The British premiere of *Airborne* caused quite a stir in London. One critic told me he thought the name Blitzstein was a typographical error, since he assumed the composer was Bernstein! The range of press reaction displayed the complex emotions evoked by Blitzstein's extraordinary musical language: naïve, brash, confrontational, and ultimately wholly convincing. On the surface, his music is easy to dismiss, but even the most cynical and resistant person ultimately gives in to its power, its originality, and its intensely passionate sincerity.



Blitzstein in London during World War II.

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST

Rosalind Elias, opera singer

Having performed in and directed *Regina*, I should say first of all that it is effective theatrically as few operas are; in that regard I would rank it with Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Blitzstein's subtle use of music to define and shape character deserves most of the credit for the work's theatrical power. There is no doubt that Blitzstein's score made the characters in the opera more compelling than those in the original play. When Regina sings "I hope you die," the music makes the moment even more frightening than it is in *The Little Foxes*. I put Lillian Hellman's objections to *Regina* down to sour grapes. She knew the opera was better than the play.

Blitzstein's gift for vocal and ensemble writing shows itself to particular advantage in *Regina*. The "Rain" Quartet is perfectly composed, and the choral work is beautiful. He also had a knack for making difficult vocal lines easier on the singers. In *Regina*'s first-act aria, the soprano has to belt it but must also hit a high A at the climactic moment. Blitzstein led up to it in such a way that the singer doesn't have to strain to hit the high note. His skill in vocal writing makes even difficult passages sound natural and simple.

Blitzstein's musical theater is an enduring success on Blitzstein's own terms. The lyrics are still bracingly urgent. The music sounds as if it had been composed yesterday and couldn't come from anyone else but him. It's all quite unsettling, as if he continues to shake us by the shoulders from our complacency. The work never loses its shock value. Thank God he never wanted to compromise.

— Mark Hollmann, composer

Leonard Lehrman, editor of the three-volume *Marc Blitzstein Songbook*

Blitzstein left a great many works unfinished at his death, including the one-act opera *Idiots First*. It was to be the first of a group of operas on stories by Bernard Malamud, which Blitzstein called *Tales of Malamud*. My teacher, Elie Siegmeister, recommended me for the job of completing this work. Over a three-year period, I studied and analyzed the work with Siegmeister and Nadia Boulanger, which proved very valuable. Ned Rorem has called it "Marc's best work." Jose Ferrer, who premiered a song from the piece under Bernstein's baton, called the lead character "the role of the century." It's had four productions and won the first Off-Broadway Opera Award for "most important event of the season" in 1978. Many have called it the most powerful Jewish opera ever written.

Joshua Schmidt, composer

When I think about Marc Blitzstein as an artist and as a human being, I can only think of one word: brave. He wrote brave music: full-bodied harmonies, rhythms, structures, forms. He wrote bravely about things he cared about the most, not locked into any pat or predictable convention. Nor was he afraid to represent the extraordinary aspects of what many of his peers failed to see in ordinary individuals and lives. His vision of art and what it could express could only be typified as brave—how many of us nowadays are willing to put work out into the world in the teeth of forces that will quash and censor it? Who in modern American music and theatrical history offers a greater example of such bravery than Blitzstein? A select few, at best.

Isn't it refreshing to have a concrete historical example not yet 100 years in the past (however troubled, flawed—*human*—that example might be) of a man who not only talked the talk, but stood up and used his gifts to fight for what he believed in? It is an honor and a great responsibility to follow in the footsteps of artists who cared so much, who experienced so much, and who had the nerve to express themselves as truthfully and magnificently as Blitzstein (and Weill). We should all proceed with such bravery and humility, and not be afraid to rock the boat if our hearts tell us to do so.

Ricky Ian Gordon, composer

When I was a little boy growing up on Long Island, about an hour from the city, intensely curious about music, and apparently music theater, I began going every Saturday to the Performing Arts Library, taking out piles of records and devouring them. Of the many records I listened to during that time, two of the most influential were the CRI recording of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and the Columbia Records recording of *Regina*. These two pieces somehow perfectly exemplify what I have been trying to do all my life. A few years ago I won a little competition given by WNYC called the "Must Have" festival, in which contestants submitted their favorite desert island recordings and explained why they couldn't live without them. The prize was a chance to sit with David Garland and play two and a half hours of your favorite music on the air. I began with the very opening of *Cradle*, Moll's "I'm stepping home now." It was exactly right. When David asked me why I liked it so much, I sang the interval that happens on "goin' up to MY room," and he understood. Blitzstein's works are the perfect blend of classical and popular and serious and vernacular; he is and always will be a hero of mine. When I write my own libretti or lyrics—whatever I do, I feel I am continuing a tradition that he began. I wish we had been friends.

Steven Blier, Artistic Director, New York Festival of Song

Each time I play Blitzstein's songs I become more enamored of his elegant, original fusion of words and music. His theater and cabaret songs are like no one else's. They can be bluesy ("Then" or "Nickel Under the Foot"), but they're not constructed like classic blues tunes; they can be vaudevillian ("Penny Candy") but they're far more complex and literary than the kind of material our old-time song-and-dance men performed; they can have broad, open melodies ("I Wish It So," "What Will It Be for Me") but Blitzstein's phrase lengths and harmonic patterns are more unpredictable and quirky than anything in the Great American Songbook. I always joke that "The Rose Song" (my favorite Blitzstein piece) sounds like what Gustav Mahler would have written if he were composing a Broadway musical.

Blitzstein was a bit of a control freak, and he never learned the art of collaboration. This is a debilitating flaw for anyone attempting to put on a show, where success depends on teamwork. I hear the same trait in his songs, which defy the kind of improvisation intrinsic to the music of Gershwin and Rodgers. You have to play them pretty much as written because Blitzstein's

unique approach to melody—which seems to meld European art song with Kurt Weill—doesn't leave much leeway for altered harmonies or jazzy interpolations. Blitzstein's own performances bear this out; I remember hearing two different recordings of him playing "Nickel Under the Foot." Though they were separated by several decades, his pianism was identical—the same tempo, the same phrasing, the same pedaling. This is true even in a straightforward walking-bass tune like "Monday Morning Blues"; you have to stay pretty close to the *Ur-text* or you'll wreck Blitzstein's musical idea. The lyric is about

a sailor who's had a wild weekend on leave and is reluctantly going back on board to resume duty. The song is in C, but Blitzstein takes the entire 32 bars before he allows the bass line to get to that root position chord. It's a perfect musical recreation of a man who is reluctant to go home; the pianist's left-hand pinky resists as long as it can before resigning itself to that final low C.

Blitzstein's songs can be awkward and heavy-handed—Regina's aria "The Best Thing of All" is a rousing piece but it pounds on the rhymes relentlessly and turns a complex viper into a blowhard. But he creates magic when he allows his strange, Cubist song-writing to flower. His best lyrics reveal the depths of the human condition, his finest melodies stay in the listener's heart forever.

John Mauceri, conductor

Will the time come to restore all the missing, inaccessible scores by this extraordinary musician who was in the center of the worlds of Broadway, opera, and political activism? Do we have room to discover this unique American voice? Surely it is time for us to honor this man and say "yes" for an answer.



Blitzstein rehearsing the original cast of *The Cradle Will Rock*, 1938.

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST