

# Lost in the Stars

## Washington National Opera

12–20 February 2016

Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's *Lost in the Stars* sailed into the Kennedy Center this February captained by Washington National Opera's Artistic Director Francesca Zambello. The production was an important event in the nation's capital, not only amplifying pressing conversations about race and unequal justice but broadening an artistic question in what has become a rich musical-theater nexus—what *is* musical theater? *Lost in the Stars* has been a challenge to define since it debuted on Broadway, where it met mixed critical response. It has continued to perplex many critics who try ungraciously to fit it into a pre-existing genre. Zambello made her case that the work should be produced by major opera companies and gathered talent that could deliver a stunning performance.

The production's credentials are impressive indeed. It was conceived initially as a collaboration between the Glimmerglass Festival and Cape Town Opera; director Tazewell Thompson traveled to South Africa to steep himself in the landscape portrayed by Alan Paton, whose heartfelt novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* explored the evils of apartheid and startled American readers into examination of our own disgraceful racial inequities in 1948. Apartheid's injustices may have been officially eliminated, but the traumas it created have left persistent scars. South African artists who participated in the co-production shared with their American colleagues details of life under apartheid and brought an authenticity and urgency to the whole endeavor that was palpable when it opened at Glimmerglass in 2012. I was there,

and the production rocked the house.

In musical terms, the 2016 version is even stronger, especially the contributions of the orchestra, due in great part to the added forces supplied by the Kennedy Center and WNO, particularly the dark richness of added violas. Conductor John DeMain's authoritative command of Weill's score brought the powerful music to the forefront.

The sound of the men in the Chorus reminds me of the powerful South African tradition of male ensembles, rooted in the practice of corralling Black miners in stockades, with music their only emotional outlet. Through the choral writing, the nation itself becomes a character, with the first act establishing the context and letting music invoke the work's panoramic feel and grand themes. The audience is challenged to feel the loneliness of living in fear of "the other," and to consider how fear and greed collude to upend the delicate balance of the world around them. I discovered that this prescient work was not just about Black vs. White but about our neglect and destruction of the earth we all share. Weill gives the opening number, "The Hills of Ixopo," to the Leader (Sean Panikkar) and Chorus. His singing, about the once great beauty of the land and how the titihoya bird cries no more in valleys now stripped bare, brought me to tears.

Opera singer Eric Owens reprises the role of Stephen Kumalo, who must travel to Johannesburg to find his son Absalom. Owens carries the story, not just with his soaring rendition of "Lost in the Stars," which brings the first act to a close, but in many small, poignant dramatic moments, finally showing a way beyond the central conflict when he seeks out the father (played unsparingly by Wynn Harmon) of his son's murder victim to ask for forgiveness and intercession.

PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

The Leader (Sean Panikkar) stands before the Chorus.



Not everything holds up so gloriously in the tricky acoustic space of the Eisenhower Theater in the Kennedy Center. Certain sounds get swallowed upstage, including occasionally Owens. It sometimes seems that scenes are bifurcated with the singing downstage and the action upstage. A firecracker number at Glimmerglass, “Who’ll Buy?,” feels underpowered here without a true Broadway belter. Nevertheless, no one could act or sing her way into our hearts any better than Lauren Michelle, who plays Irina, Absalom’s pregnant girlfriend. Her lyric soprano sound illuminates legitimately operatic passages, yet demonstrates a darker complexity that feels integrated in this crossover work.

Tazewell Thompson along with set and costume designer Michael Mitchell have created a powerful statement indeed with a unit “stockade” set. When its walls rise partway, Black members

of the ensemble must crawl under while the Whites walk upright downstage.

Despite Paton’s reservations about the original adaptation, I think he would have been well pleased not only with Weill’s music, but the heartbreaking tenderness of the work as produced by WNO and especially the stirring finale. Might he have acknowledged the choice of mixing musical styles as a courageous one? It mirrors the challenges of bringing together a nation of so many differences. Can we bridge the divides and listen to each other’s songs?

**Susan Galbraith**  
Washington, D.C.

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## Lessons from a Fellowship

by Adam Turner

Earlier this year while working on Washington National Opera’s production of *Lost in the Stars*, one of Maxwell Anderson’s lyrics kept resonating within me, undoubtedly aided by Kurt Weill’s masterful setting. From “A Bird of Passage”:

“This is the life of men on earth;  
Out of darkness we come at birth  
Into a lamplit room, and then  
Go forward into dark again.”

From the darkness of the unknown, thrust into the warmth and light of discovery, only to go forth again into the unknown. Literature is rife with the metaphor of the bird’s passage for the human journey, but something about this particular musical setting affected me, a reminder of the artist’s endless search for understanding and sacred obligation. The profession of conductor is frequently compared to the priesthood, because both are intercessors serving a power greater than themselves—in my case, bringing the music of geniuses to audiences. The conductors for whom I have the greatest respect are those who combine serving the music with an acute awareness of the bigger picture. That’s one of the overarching lessons from my recent experience as the inaugural Julius Rudel/Kurt Weill Conducting Fellow.

As cover conductor for *Lost in the Stars*, I had the distinct honor of working closely alongside Maestro John DeMain, a veteran of opera and musical theater, who himself worked with Julius Rudel at New York City Opera. From John I learned about Maestro Rudel’s artistic legacy, specifically his insistence on equal balance between drama and music in the theater. Throughout the score of *Lost in the Stars*, Weill composed extended musical passages with cinematic underscoring (“The Search” and “Fear!” come immediately to mind), moments in which the conductor must coordinate the musical pacing and the stage action. It was fascinating to watch John in these moments, observing his concentration and his sensitivity in shaping these scenes. John conveyed to me the importance of



“theatrical vitality” (a term he used to describe Rudel), which I interpret as a charge to become a “man of the theater”—a conductor who participates actively in shaping the drama unfolding onstage, fully invested in both words and music, with an intense commitment to understanding and unifying the two.

Another lesson I learned is that not only must the conductor shape the totality of the drama, but he or she must strive to strengthen each singer’s ability to express text with a rich and evocative palette. This lesson was reinforced when I observed Victoria Clark working with semi-finalists of the Lotte Lenya Competition. As she helped competitors find nuance with a variety of vocal colors, discover a greater understanding of text within dramatic context, or tweak vocal placement, I gained a fuller understanding of my role in nurturing and supporting the next generation of singing actors. The line between opera and musical theater continues to become increasingly blurred, and just as *maestri* like Abravanel, Rudel, and DeMain have fearlessly undertaken a broad range of musical theater, so do I intend to stay on this never-ending path of learning and discovery.

Adam Turner will conduct *The Seven Deadly Sins* at Virginia Opera in September and October 2016.



# Die Dreigroschenoper

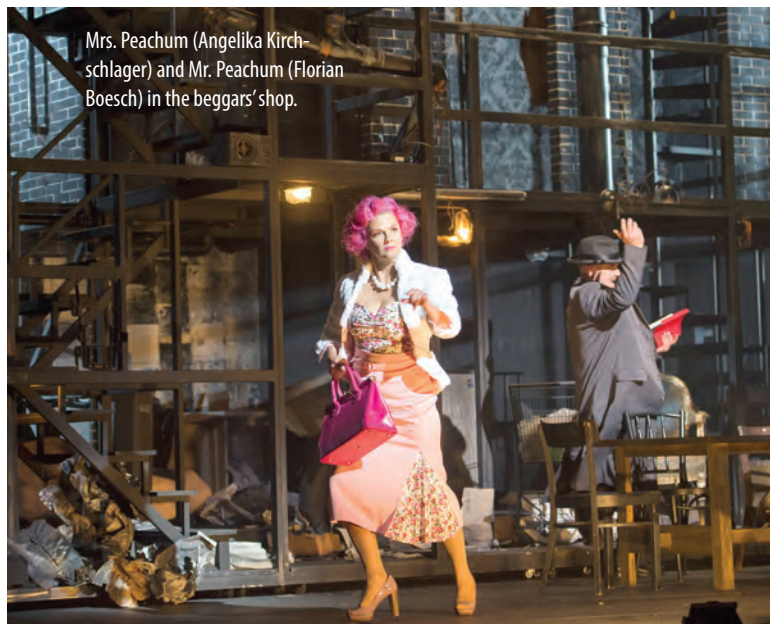
Theater an der Wien  
Vienna

Premiere: 13 January 2016

To mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the opera division of the Theater an der Wien, the producers selected *Die Dreigroschenoper*, arguably an odd choice, considering that it may not be an opera at all. Weill himself commented in 1929, “The goal was to come up with music that could be sung by actors, that is, by musicians without professional training. What first seemed to be a constraint proved to be a huge asset.” In casting the production, however, the creative team neglected Weill’s discovery and hired opera singers for most of the major roles, with one notable exception: Macheath was played by the well-known Austrian actor Tobias Moretti, whose voice proved to be not bad at all. How did it work out? In casting and in most other matters, the Vienna production was a decidedly mixed bag.

The evening is too tame, at times even lackluster; one part of the problem seems to be the staging. Despite Boris Kudlička’s set design, with lots of staircases, rags, and paraphernalia, all evoking a dark atmosphere, the production comes off merely as a quaint operetta. The cutthroat aspects of the piece don’t come through. This shark is no robber but—seductive qualities notwithstanding—more the object of driven women. There’s nothing knife-like about Macheath (Tobias Moretti), and you don’t see him scheming. He’s a victim. You start to figure this out when he marries Polly (Nina Bernstein), and the hapless gang prepares the reception. The impression solidifies in the brothel scene, when he voluntarily steps into a dominatrix’s cage, which turns into his prison cell at the Old Bailey. And here, patiently suffering, he awaits his execution. Mack’s passivity shows itself early. Once the sounds of the brisk overture subside, he appears in an elegant outfit and launches into the “Moritat” as he pulls the curtain closed. The moment the notorious London gangster has disappeared, the other characters walk on one after another and start to open the curtain back up. As they draw it back little by little, they sing the rest of the familiar stanzas.

At this point you already get the feeling that Moretti, a most expressive actor, will have a tough time up against the pro singers. And yet he succeeds in making his mark, even during up-tempo passages. Sadly, the converse proves the greater problem: with only one exception, the singers can’t match his acting skills. The imbalance leads to a disturbing discrepancy that director Keith Warner seems powerless to camouflage. Moretti’s aloof style counteracts the operetta tendencies of the staging, and honors go to the spirited acting and effortless singing of Angelika Kirchschrager as Mrs. Peachum. London’s demi-monde, especially as a group, comes across as harmless entertainment. Florian Boesch, despite his big voice, portrays Macheath’s antagonist Peachum not as a merciless beggars’ boss, but as a homebody and factotum. Even in her eccentric outfit, Kirchschrager packs more



Mrs. Peachum (Angelika Kirchschrager) and Mr. Peachum (Florian Boesch) in the beggars’ shop.

PHOTO: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

punch. Far too discreet is Jenny, the queen of ill repute; Anne Sofie von Otter strolls through the piece like the patroness of a salon. Mack’s old buddy Brown is also rather passive, more like a prompter. As police commissioner, Markus Butter can’t even manage the affected bonhomie of the corrupt official. Cannons are merely the subject of dutiful voice lessons. In his other role as the mounted messenger, he at least succeeds in introducing a whiff of cynicism. He descends from the flies dolled up as a queen—recalling the current queen at her coronation in 1953—and pardons Macheath.

Amid stretches of dullness, the two young ladies who vie for Mack’s attention admittedly have some good moments: Polly does a lusty yet refined rendition of “Seeräuberjenny,” and a true highlight is her catfight with Lucy Brown (Gan-ya Ben-Gur Akselrod). First they torment their shared companion in his cell, then the competition gets physical. For that purpose, they have been put into full operatic regalia. They sing as they fight, ripping off each other’s baroque costumes piece by piece. At the end their tall wigs go flying. It’s a wonderful image of deconstruction, with masterful singing, so splendid that only we beggarly admirers of Weill and Brecht’s genius can conceive it.

Shouldn’t *Die Dreigroschenoper* stand or fall through mastery of its wildly divergent musical styles, and through the crass, gutsy cynicism of its text? The Klangforum Wien conducted by Johannes Kalitzke played superbly, with great precision and a sound that could navigate between fragile and rough, but, alas, not impudently enough. The Arnold Schoenberg Chor led by Erwin Ortner came closest to the old Weill-Brecht sound.

**Norbert Mayer**  
Vienna

# L'opera da tre soldi

## Piccolo Teatro Strehler Milan

Premiere: 19 April 2016

An Italian version of *Die Dreigroschenoper* was staged at Milan's Teatro Filodrammatici as early as 1930: Anton Giulio Bragaglia directed and the original London setting was retained. Twenty-six years later Giorgio Strehler transferred the action to Chicago in the 1930s, winning the approval both of Brecht himself and local audiences, who were even more enthusiastic when the production was revived in 1973 with popular singers Domenico Modugno as Mackie and Milva as Jenny. The work was then mounted in the intimate Piccolo Teatro (now the Teatro Grassi), which made for an ideal rapport between stage and audience but whose pit was so small that it could accommodate only half a dozen players. Brecht's participation led to numerous stagings of his works in the state-funded theater, as well as Strehler's version of *Lascesa e caduta della città di Mahagonny* in the equally intimate Piccola Scala in 1964.

In spite of the company's strong Brechtian tradition—in 1995 an entire festival was devoted to his works—it has offered no further productions of *L'opera da tre soldi* until this year. Strehler's was after all a hard act to follow, and although the new production by Damiano Michieletto at the newer and larger Piccolo Teatro Strehler was musically complete and boasted a fresh translation by Roberto Menin and Michieletto himself (credited with the lyrics), opening night brought only intermittent musical pleasures and no new theatrical insights.

In a way this is surprising, for the director claims to have been long fascinated by the work and often introduces Brechtian elements into the controversial productions of 19th-century operas for which he is best known. Paolo Fantin's set, surrounded by a framework of metal rods, suggests that all the characters are ultimately enclosed within a prison, and the entire story unfolds as at a court hearing, with the characters appealing occasionally to a bewigged judge (the only visual reference to the original English setting) or to a jury consisting of the other charac-

ters. The action is presented cyclically, with Mackie making the same speech—as the “vanishing representative of a vanishing class”—at both the beginning and end of the evening: the first time he is actually hanged, while the second time he enjoys the generous pardon granted by the “Gracious Queen.” As in most of his opera productions, Michieletto updates the action to the present day, and although the London place names remain, the costumes—designed by Carla Teti—of Reverend Kimball (here a Catholic priest) and Tiger Brown suggest Italy rather than England. All of these choices prove functional enough, although the period setting has a charm of its own which might have helped the actors create more specific characters. With Michieletto one never gets the impression, as Lotte Lenya wrote of Brecht, that the “bawds, bully boys and beggars of eighteenth-century London were creatures to delight his heart.” Macheath's fellow criminals have gym-sculpted bodies and bland faces and voices. The director's decision to present the crowd of paupers as drowning migrants, clinging in vain to their life jackets, proves pretentious and distracting rather than conscience-stirring for an audience accustomed to witnessing real-life events like that on television every evening.

Yet the main weakness of the production is musical. The director cast actors with little vocal personality or technique, despite their extensive theatrical experience. Most of them are able to start their songs effectively, but they can't sustain them, and none of them—not even Giandomenico Cupaiuolo as the Street Singer, who possesses the most interesting voice—is equal to all the music assigned to them in Weill's score. Conductor Giuseppe Grazioli, who led selected members of the local Orchestra Sinfonica “Giuseppe Verdi” in the pit, respects the integrity and orchestration of the score, but the sound he elicits is neither rich in atmosphere nor rhythmically compelling. Peppe Servillo and Margherita Di Rauso as the Peachums offer perhaps the most persuasive performances. The former's vibrato-ridden singing is an acquired taste, but his Neapolitan background (audible in his accent) gives him extra insight into the implications of poverty. Stella Piccioni (Lucy) and Maria Roveran (Polly) make a success of the “Jealousy Duet,” but Roveran's unmodulated sound proves wearisome in much of her music (a problem heightened by the theater's amplification system). The Spanish actress Rossy De Palma's cabaret-style delivery as Jenny is too stereotyped and uncertain in intonation, particularly in softer passages, to prove compelling, although she received plentiful applause for her efforts. As Tiger Brown and Mackie Messer, Sergio Leone and Marco Foschi are plausible in speech but neutral in song. They clearly grasp their roles, but the theatrical context is insufficiently specific for the Italian text—effective enough in print—to resonate deeply.

**Stephen Hastings**  
Milan



Macheath (Marco Foschi) enjoys a visit to his favorite brothel.

PHOTO: MASAR PASQUALI



# Symphony No. 2

## Philadelphia Orchestra

8–10 April 2016

How French is Kurt Weill's Symphony No. 2? The question presented itself at the work's Philadelphia Orchestra debut, when conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin placed it on the first half of the program with much French-ness to follow: Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand and Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. The performance was suggestive, too, as the orchestra produced a warmth in the string sonorities that clearly recalled Francis Poulenc and even revealed similar chord structures. Weill began work on his only mature symphony before fleeing Germany in 1933, in response to a commission from a French patron, la princesse de Polignac, but he did not complete it until he was settled in Paris, after he had composed *Die sieben Todsünden* and before he took up *Marie Galante*. Weill was famous for adapting readily to his surroundings. Could his absorption into a new milieu have happened so quickly, with a work conceived and initiated somewhere else? He did enter French musical society and the *haut monde* with ease, and he was certainly familiar with developments in French music of the day. Weill had already made a valuable friend in Darius Milhaud, a leading member of Les Six who championed Weill when other French composers scorned him. Weill finished composing the Symphony several months before he produced a string of classic *chansons* in 1934, but he had set *La grande complainte de Fantômas* and was already thinking in terms of French language and music. If nothing else, interpretive choices that give the piece a French accent are legitimate.

In the big picture, few Germanic composers were writing symphonies in the 1930s. In so many ways, the piece stands alone in music history, making it hard to determine exactly what it is—a work without context. It's also one of Weill's few major works without a structure supplied, or at least suggested, by a collaborator or a text. (Even Prokofiev jump-started his symphonic output with Mozart's world in his "Classical" Symphony and Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 111, for his Symphony No. 2.) Perhaps Weill's thoughts turned to Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony with its closing tarantella, especially since both of these Jewish composers had been banned in Nazi Germany. There's no doubt that Weill had fully matured chops for his second outing in this genre (his first symphony is a student work), as even a brief encounter with *Die Bürgschaft* in particular will demonstrate.

Nézet-Séguin has clearly benefited from a return visit to the piece, and the time away has allowed for new interpretations to emerge. His recording with the Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal (2004) is alert but generalized, while details abounded in the Philadelphia concert, with the conductor making the most of the music's underlying contrapuntal activity that supports the intentionally pithy melodic content. However much Weill was known for the melodiousness of his songs, the symphony is supported by motifs as short as four notes, and they can wear out their welcome in a less well-rounded interpretation. The performance's aforementioned warmth of sonority grew partly out of

the Philadelphia Orchestra's sound, which in decades past was the driving element of its symphonic interpretation, though not under Nézet-Séguin, who allows the legendary lushness to arise naturally in appropriate moments without wallowing in it. The winds display the same amplitude of sound, and the soloists deserve credit for avoiding the somewhat forced animation heard in Gary Bertini's recording on EMI and tapping into a deeper emotional vein. The full-throated use of orchestral forces reveals that Nézet-Séguin clearly doesn't see the piece as a chamber symphony, which would be an easy assumption considering its 30-minute running time and conscious lack of Mahlerian grandeur or verbosity.

Nézet-Séguin's penchant for lively tempos flattered the first movement's rhythmic activity, but also conveyed, perhaps in a reference to Weill's recent flight from Germany, a sense of terror in the strongly paced final movement, *Allegro vivace*. In the tarantella that forms the last movement's coda, the pulse quickened even more. Most conductors do it this way, but I have never heard the *accelerandi* handled as they are here; the orchestra imparted to them the frantic irony of Shostakovich.

The Philadelphia Orchestra's first outing definitely made new friends for Weill's Symphony No. 2. The audience response, if not exactly rapturous, was at least enthusiastic, and some of the musicians praised the work, which was not published until 1966, as a significant discovery.

David Patrick Stearns  
Philadelphia

### Yannick Nézet-Séguin on Weill's Symphony No. 2:

"This symphony is a jewel. It was premiered by Bruno Walter at the Concertgebouw, the same person who did premieres of Mahler symphonies. But we're talking with Weill something much shorter. Sometimes, one can think of Stravinsky; and some other times, indeed like Mahler—a smaller Mahler. But more importantly, I think we can recognize Weill . . . in the lyrical inspiration of it. But the construction and the structure and the architecture, and even the dramatic input, are really of someone who completely mastered the symphonic world. So, to introduce Kurt Weill in a program with better-known works of the same era, *An American in Paris* by Gershwin and Ravel's Left-Hand Concerto, I think will, hopefully, serve to convince people that Kurt Weill is really a first-rate composer."

Watch the video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfTJxEUkqik](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfTJxEUkqik)

# Der Jasager

## Den Norske Opera og Ballett Oslo

11-17 November 2015

Shortly after he arrived in the USA in 1935, Weill declared that his and Brecht's "simple but not childish" school opera *Der Jasager* was his "most important composition." He went on to say that the piece had been performed in 300 schools in Germany, frequently in other European countries, and even once in New York. Today the work is seldom heard. The Norwegian premiere of *Der Jasager* did not take place until 2011. It was such a success that the Norwegian Opera and Ballet in Oslo organized a revival through its "Ung opera" ("Young Opera"), a project designed to allow/encourage children to participate in the production of operatic works. In addition to members of the Opera's children's choir, young musicians from Musikk på Majorstuen (a primary-school project that supports children gifted in music) and Barratt Due Musikk institutt (an organization renowned for its national program for young talents) took part. The three Students were played by members of the children's choir, as was the role of the Boy (Aksel Johannes Skramstad Rykkvin). Professional opera singers Espen Langvik and Vigdis Unsgård portrayed the Teacher and the Mother, respectively. The first half of the program consisted of a selection of Brecht's songs for children set by Eisler and Dessau.

The fundamental dilemma of *Der Jasager* helps explain why the work is infrequently performed today: A child must decide whether to sacrifice his own life in accordance with an ancient custom for a cause of which he is wholeheartedly convinced. This moment sparked debate starting with the premiere in 1930, and the consequences of the Boy's stark choice, based on the key concept of *Einverständnis* ("informed consent"), have not become easier to grasp or accept in the intervening decades.

The Norwegian version of the text was created by director Gunnar Bergstrøm. The program notes set the scene: a boy

lives with his sick mother in a city gripped by an epidemic, so his decision affects not only his mother and himself but the whole community. When we first see the Boy, he is toying with a model airplane. Later, at the moment he forfeits his own life so that the Teacher and the Students may bring medicine back to their hometown, the same plane in flight is projected against the back wall. Finally the mother appears, carrying it in her hands. The plane may thus symbolize the boy's immortal soul and suggest associations with the Noh-play *Taniko* on which the opera is based. *Taniko* ends with a spirit accompanying the Boy, who has been restored miraculously to life. In Oslo the Boy also reappeared, with his mother, at the conclusion. In this way some of the harshness of the piece is softened, yet inevitably such an ending mitigates the finality and severity of the boy's decision.

The score of *Der Jasager* draws on modernized baroque principles Weill had developed in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. The musical performance was marked by precision and youthful energy, not least thanks to the orchestra led by Steffen Kammler. The children, especially the Boy, sang very well indeed, and the professional singers delivered their parts proficiently. The roles of the Mother and Teacher may also be taken by children, but in Oslo the interplay of a large group of children with two adults worked well and made for increased realism. The choreography by Nina Braathen delivered economical simplicity and rhythmical firmness, and she successfully incorporated gestures from baroque-opera practice, a nice complement to the music. The *Verfremdungseffekt* obtained through gestures and body movements emphasized the story's gravity and its inescapable climax.

The choir's costumes—reminiscent of school uniforms with "British" bowler hats—reinforced the "school opera" effect. The three Students wore shiny orange wigs, however, a choice that remains mysterious. The use of projections, a device popularized during the 1920s by epic theater, had potential but turned out to be only partly successful. Film sequences showing glimpses of mountains, sunrise, houses, etc. added color to the stage, yet the clips were distorted far too quickly into kaleidoscopic abstractions. The continuous projections thus offered more distraction than enhancement.

A work performed by enthusiastic and talented children seldom fails to captivate an audience. Despite the few weaknesses suggested above, the Oslo version of *Der Jasager* definitely came off as an appealing performance. It combined youthful persuasiveness with a degree of *Verfremdung* sufficient to allow a plausible version of Brecht and Weill's message(s) to come through—even in 2015.

Magnar Breivik  
Trondheim



The Boy (Aksel Johannes Skramstad Rykkvin), the Teacher (Espen Langvik), and the Mother (Vigdis Unsgård) in front of an abstract projection.

PHOTO: ERIK BERG

# Der Zar lässt sich photographieren

## Kurt Weill Fest Dessau

Premiere: 28 February 2016

A double-bill of Krenek's *Der Diktator* and Weill's *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* at the Anhaltische Theater Dessau created a fitting centerpiece for this year's festival, which explored the two composers' works side by side. The one-act operas, which premiered within four months of each other in 1928, both involve a murder-plot-turned-seduction-tale centered on an authoritarian ruler, encapsulating the era of *Zeitoper* despite the contrasts in musical style. By 1933, *Der Zar*—libretto by expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser—had become the most frequently performed opera by a living German composer after Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

*Der Diktator*, for which the composer fashioned his own libretto, suffers from dramaturgical weaknesses which Krenek himself acknowledged. His neo-Romantic idiom is also one-dimensional when juxtaposed with the sophisticated motivic unity and acrid harmonies of Weill's *Der Zar*. But given the similarity in plot line, the works cry out for a joint production. A new staging by Doris Sophia Heinrichsen set out to capture a 1920s film esthetic but at times felt insufficiently realized. The director originally intended to place the members of the Anhaltische Philharmonie around the action but abandoned the concept when it proved acoustically unfavorable. The unit set designed by Nicole Bergmann consisted of little more than a small platform, covered by a white curtain that doubled as a scrim for projected images, and a plush red couch.

While setting the action against projected black-and-white stills is an inspired touch for Weill's *Zar*, which takes place in a photography studio, the concept did not serve *Der Diktator* well. In an attempt to evoke silent film, Heinrichsen opted for posed gestures which appeared stilted on the opera stage. Tasteful period costumes by Jessica Rohm sparked the imagination but could not compensate for undeveloped characterizations. Projected images ranged from a blurred vision of a landscape when the Officer (Albrecht Kludszuweit) recalls being blinded by poison gas on the battlefield, to the image of a dead elephant as the Dictator (Ulf Paulsen) seduces Maria, who has entered his hotel room determined to avenge her ailing husband, the Officer.

Local favorite Paulsen brought a commanding bass voice to the title character but did not project the predatory charm that compels Maria (lush-voiced dramatic soprano Iordanka Derilova) not only to abandon her murder plot but to sacrifice her own life when the Dictator's wife, Charlotte (Stefanie Kunschke), pulls a gun in a jealous rage. The final tableau in which the Officer stumbles into the hotel crying out Maria's name was, by contrast, appropriately blood-curdling. The house orchestra under acting General Music Director Daniel Carlberg took a tempo at once vigorous and spacious. Full-bodied strings and elegant woodwinds gave the score its due, while the brass could have sounded cleaner, particularly in the fugal interlude after the first tableau.



The False Angèle (Iordanka Derilova) and the Czar (Ulf Paulsen) in the photography studio.

PHOTO: CLAUDIA HEISEL

*Der Zar* followed a nearly half-hour intermission which seemed unnecessarily long, given the minimal changes to the set. The orchestra's strings could have been more flexible through Weill's racing, angular lines, and the theater's male chorus more homogeneous, but the director made a clever choice in arranging the singers on either side of the stage to frame the action. In transforming the eleven-strong cast into part of the set—now posing as the pictures on the walls of Angèle's studio, now standing on either side of the studio platform with their backs to the audience—Heinrichsen made a valiant effort to exploit the entire stage.

Thanks to the ingenious musico-dramatic construction of the opera—about a failed plot to murder the czar with a rigged camera—the characters sprang more fully to life than in *Der Diktator*. Once again in the title role, Paulsen was sly and seductive, making his first entrance to a foxtrot, then dancing with the false Angèle (the charismatic Derilova) to the famous “Tango Angèle” played on a gramophone. Kunschke brought a sweet timbre to the role of the real Angèle, who finally takes the czar's picture after the conspirators have fled.

Projected images served to draw attention to the cinematic qualities of certain passages in Weill's score: heralding the czar and two detectives with pounding ostinato, for example, or mocking the ruler before the entrance of his equerry (André Eckert). *Der Zar* shows Weill at the height of his powers, synthesizing free atonality with the simplified dramatic articulation that he explored in *Mahagonny Songspiel* and perfected in *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Even if the production at times felt undercooked, it made a strong case for staging Weill's opera more often.

**Rebecca Schmid**  
Berlin



# The Cradle Will Rock

## Cantus Classics CACD 5.010931

Readers of this journal will already be familiar with the conditions under which Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* received its world premiere in 1937. After a successful open dress rehearsal, the U.S. government (whose Federal Theatre Project funded the work) refused to allow a performance. Instead, the entire company moved twenty blocks uptown—with its audience—to a different theater. The actors got around union regulations by taking seats in the auditorium and delivering their lines and lyrics from there, while the composer sat alone onstage playing the piano and introducing the scenes. To this day, *Cradle* is commonly performed, and invariably recorded, with piano only, even though Leonard Bernstein brought the fully orchestrated work in concert form to New York's City Center in 1947, and then to Broadway later that year, where he conducted the first few nights of what proved to be a disappointing run of thirty-four performances. That cast included Alfred Drake as Larry Foreman, and Vivian Vance (yes, Ethel Mertz) as Mrs. Mister. The orchestra was seated onstage, with the cast in front of them; minimal staging was provided by Howard da Silva—ironically Drake's nemesis in the original production of *Oklahoma!*, when he played Judd to Drake's Curly. The playbill conveys a good impression of how minimal the staging was; the eight production credits start with "Miss Vance's hat by Harold Green." Not until February 1960 was the work staged as originally envisioned, with full orchestration, scenery, and costumes. That performance by the New York City Opera has now been released on CD by the budget German label, Cantus Classics.

This is unequivocally an important historical document. The cast was rehearsed and prepared by the composer, and the orchestra is conducted by Lehman Engel, who had been music director in 1937—but whose job ended abruptly with the dress rehearsal. Quite simply, the singers are spectacular, with Tammy Grimes as Moll, Ruth Kobart as Mrs. Mister, the brilliant David Atkinson as Larry Foreman, Nancy Dussault as Sister Mister, and John Macurdy as President Prexy.

Given its claim to being definitive, one can only wish the recording sounded better—you'd think it was produced in the 1930s rather than during the high-fidelity era—and

that it had more useful liner notes, a complete cast list at the very least (see below). Engel picks up his cues and gives the score a forward momentum that is occasionally breathtaking, but may also leave the singers breathless. Blitzstein and his director (Howard Da Silva again) encouraged the actors to yell, also noticeable on the historic cast album from the original production, for which Blitzstein provided the accompaniment and Da Silva played Larry Foreman. The shouting becomes tedious in an audio-only experience, whereas it might be funny onstage, and the sheer volume and attendant distortion make for some unpleasant passages. The orchestra is occasionally properly balanced, but the strings almost always sound distant; Blitzstein's orchestral touches—Hawaiian guitar, castanets, maracas, and choke cymbal—are mostly inaudible.

Any New Yorker listening to this recording will feel a sense of loss when considering the level of this New York City Opera performance and the commitment shown by the audience in their attention, their laughter, and their applause. It will not ease the pain to mention that in addition to the five performances of *Cradle* (one was added due to popular demand), subscribers heard in the same month Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* (the very next day with Phyllis Curtin, Richard Cassilly, Norman Treigle, and Chester Ludgin), *Street Scene*, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (with Frances Bible, Walter Cassel, and Beverly Sills), and *The Consul* (with Patricia Neway and Chester Ludgin, staged by Gian Carlo Menotti). That was how New York City Opera did things in 1960 under the direction of Julius Rudel and his partner, John White.

The decline and fall of City Opera aside, this album cannot fail to remind us how very far we still are from respecting and performing Blitzstein's music so that today's listeners can hear it as it ought to sound. The recording brings to mind the 1957

account of *Lulu* we all listened to in the early 1960s, conducted by Herbert Häfner. It was all we had, and we knew it was just an approximation. And so we must continue to wait, knowing that *The Cradle Will Rock* deserves a complete contemporary recording with an orchestra, a committed conductor, and a great cast of singing actors. Until that day comes, we remain grateful for budget German CD labels.

John Mauceri  
New York

**NEW YORK CITY OPERA**  
THURSDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 11, 1960, AT 8:15 O'CLOCK  
Premiere performance by the New York City Opera of  
Marc Blitzstein's  
**THE CRADLE WILL ROCK**  
Cast  
(In order of appearance)

|                          |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Moll .....               | Tammy Grimes (debut)      |
| Gent .....               | Seth Riggs                |
| Dick .....               | Arnold Voketaitis         |
| Cop .....                | Dan Merriman              |
| Reverend Salvation ..... | Kenneth Smith             |
| Editor Daily .....       | Jack Harrold              |
| Yasha .....              | Michael Wager (debut)     |
| Dauber .....             | Chandler Cowles (debut)   |
| President Prexy .....    | John Macurdy              |
| Professor Trixie .....   | Philip Brun               |
| Professor Mamie .....    | Maurice Stern             |
| Professor Scoot .....    | Howard Fried              |
| Dr. Specialist .....     | Joshua Hecht              |
| Harry Druggist .....     | William Griffiths (debut) |
| Clerk .....              | Lehman Engel              |
| Mr. Mister .....         | Craig Timberlake          |
| Mrs. Mister .....        | Ruth Kobart               |
| Junior Mister .....      | Keith Kaldenberg          |
| Sister Mister .....      | Nancy Dussault            |
| Steve .....              | Frank Porretta            |
| Bugs .....               | George Del Monte          |
| Sadie Polock .....       | Sophie Ginn (debut)       |
| Gus Polock .....         | Robert Kerns              |
| Larry Foreman .....      | David Atkinson            |
| Ella Hammer .....        | Jane A. Johnston (debut)  |
| Reporters .....          | Seth Riggs                |
|                          | William Saxon             |

Townpeople  
Conducted by Lehman Engel (debut)  
Staged by Howard Da Silva (debut)  
Sets by David Hays  
Costumes by Ruth Morley  
Dance Direction by Billy Parsons  
Chorus Master: William Jonson