

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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Adapting Dreigroschenoper: A New Threepenny Opera

Featured Review: Critical Edition of *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel*

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Cover photo: Debbie Kurup (Lucy Brown), Rory Kinnear (Macheath), Rosalie Craig (Polly Peachum) during the "Jealousy Duet" in the National Theatre production of *The Threepenny Opera*.
Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

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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 editor are welcome.

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CORRECTION

From John Mauceri

The Cantus Classics release of the New York City Opera's cast recording of *The Cradle Will Rock* (which I reviewed in the Spring 2016 *Newsletter*) has a significant structural failure that became clear to me only after further study of the recording in conjunction with the full score: The transfer is approximately a half-tone higher than the original recording. Since the remastering was made from a tape, the tempos are therefore also significantly faster than anything Lehman Engel or Marc Blitzstein intended. With this in mind, *caveat emptor!*

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Threepenny Opera has closed at the National Theatre, but Rufus Norris's powerful production of Simon Stephens's new English adaptation has changed the game. It drew extensive attention on both sides of the Atlantic and may point the way to new performance traditions, not to mention new ways of understanding this classic of the musical theater. We celebrate the long, successful run with a variety of voices, including an interview in which Stephens looks back on his work and a summary discussion of the English versions of the show in light of his contribution.

With this issue we take a new approach to Weill-related news, presenting items of interest, with particular emphasis on forthcoming events, from the "Wide World of Weill." (An exciting

new Marc Blitzstein discovery is also represented.) Our calendar of upcoming performances, formerly found on this page, has moved to the back cover. Prominently featured in the review section is conductor Philip Headlam's introduction to the latest publication of the Kurt Weill Edition, *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel*. Headlam is uniquely qualified to consider the volume, having led a performance of the work with materials derived from the critical edition. Some notes on the correspondence between Weill and theater critic Herbert Ihering from around the time of the *Songspiel*'s premiere supplement the review.

I'd like to thank everyone on the staff for their help in making this issue come together, especially our new Associate Editor Elizabeth Blaufox, Veronica Chaffin, and Natasha Nelson.

Dave Stein

World Premiere Recording of *The Road of Promise*

The Road of Promise is now available!

Conductor Ted Sperling leads the live recording of the U.S. premiere by The Collegiate Chorale (now known as MasterVoices) and the Orchestra of St. Luke's, released on 18 November as a 2-CD set on Navona Records, an imprint of Parma Recordings. The cast features a distinguished roster of soloists led by tenor Anthony Dean Griffey, Mark Delavan, Ron Rifkin, Philip Cutlip, and Lenya Competition winners Lauren Michelle, Justin Hopkins, and Megan Marino.

The Road of Promise is a condensed concert adaptation of the legendary Max Reinhardt pageant, *The Eternal Road*, that awed Manhattan in 1937. The concert version requires fewer resources than the stage work and falls within the range of most good-sized choral groups. Please direct licensing inquiries to European American Music (eamdc.com).



25th Annual Kurt Weill Fest



2017 will bring the 25th annual Kurt Weill Fest to Dessau, Germany, Weill's birthplace. The festival also coincides with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which began in nearby Wittenberg. In an effort to tie these historic events together, the festival will draw on themes of faith and social transformation under the title "Luther, Weill & Mendelssohn." Festival favorites Ute Gfrerer, James Holmes, HK Gruber and the Ensemble Modern, and Kristjan Järvi and the MDR Sinfonieorchester will all be on hand for this birthday celebration! Highlights include:

- 24 February – *Die sieben Todsünden*, with Angelika Kirchschrager as Anna I and the MDR Sinfonieorchester conducted by Kristjan Järvi;
- 26 February – *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Oper Halle, directed by Michael von zur Mühlen;
- 4 March – Gala concert featuring Ute Gfrerer, James Holmes, the Ensemble Modern and the Anhaltische Philharmonie;
- 5 March – *Die Verheißung*, with the MDR Rundfunkchor and Sinfonieorchester, conducted by Kristjan Järvi; soloists will include several past Lenya Competition winners (see page 23);
- 12 March – Concert suite from *Marie Galante*, performed by Ute Gfrerer and the Ensemble Modern, conducted by HK Gruber. Also on the program is Weill's Symphony No. 2;
- 12 March – *Braver Soldat Johnny*, the concert adaptation of *Johnny Johnson*, by the MDR, conducted by Kristjan Järvi.

The Foundation joins the Kurt Weill Fest in celebrating 25 years of bringing the music of Kurt Weill back to its roots.

Adapting *Dreigroschenoper*: A New *Threepenny Opera*

The curtain has come down for the last time on the National Theatre's landmark production of *The Threepenny Opera*, which ran for 83 performances in London. Spectators around the world have also had the opportunity to see it in National Theatre Live cinema screenings. Controversial, long-running productions like this don't come along every day, and it has provoked a great deal of comment and debate, much of which has focused on the new English version by Simon Stephens (based on a literal translation of the original by Susan Momoko Hingley). Because the music was handled with exemplary fidelity to Weill's original score and favorable reaction from the critics was nearly unanimous, there is little need to comment on that dimension of the production. But the free adaptation of Brecht and Hauptmann's original text has raised questions that extend beyond this production to address the future of *The Threepenny Opera* in the 21st century.

From Simon Stephens, *A Working Diary* (Bloomsbury, 2016):

10 October 2014

The politics and ethics surrounding this process of producing new English versions of texts written in other languages has sparked much debate.

In his introduction to his compelling versions of Strindberg plays, Gregory Motton savages the culture of writers writing versions from literal translations. The subjective decisions the writers make ease the jaggedness and vitality of the original plays, he argues. The act of writing a version becomes necessarily a dilution. The esteemed Chekhovian translator Michael Frayn agrees. His widely produced versions are written from the Russian. Frayn is a fluent Russian speaker.

I admire Motton and Frayn hugely. I also think they are wrong.

I think their ideas are based on the odd assumption that it is in some way possible to make a pure translation. It isn't. Language shifts and mutates historically as well as geographically and to assume the possibility of a perfect translation is to ignore these shifts and changes.

It seems especially odd to suggest that a play text, out of any literary form, should be carved out of an attempt to accurately translate the original language of a writer writing a century ago. Playwriting, for me, is not a literary or linguistic pursuit and plays are not literary artefacts. I think of them instead as being starting points for a night in the theatre.

It bewilders me that a translator of a Chekhov play should concern herself with accurately replicating in English the Russian of the early last century, even if this comes at the expense of the vitality, sensuality, pathos, rage and compassion of the spirit in which those plays were first made. When the concern with accuracy prevents interpretation or imagination on behalf of the director or an artistic team, then it is not just wrong-headed but damaging.

23 November 2014

My last day in the NT studio, finishing off a redraft of *Threepenny Opera*. I'm as happy with it as I have ever been. It's been a hard play to write a version of. So much of the actual text is crooked. Its narrative is incoherent. It is predicated on ludicrous and ill-thought through devices—a series of repeats that are repetitious, an absolute absence of any judicial process or compelling penal system; a frankly absurd *deus ex machina*. It feels like it was knocked off while Brecht was drunk and shagging. So there is an impulse to repair its crooked dramaturgy and find a dramatic world that is cogent and resonant and which rises to the extraordinary music. Weill's score redefined musical theatre for a century and remains haunting.

I'm not sure that my idea for justifying the *deus ex machina* works completely. I leave the play with an unresolved sense of outrage at the injustice of Mack's survival and I'm not sure if that is right.

Stephen Hinton, editor of the critical edition of *Die Dreigroschenoper*:

This is not a straight translation. It's a fidelity in spirit—and spirit this production has aplenty. Billed as "a new adaptation by Simon Stephens," it is quite in keeping with the original *Dreigroschenoper* insofar as the premiere production listed Brecht not as author but as "adaptor." Presenting a defamiliarized, jazzy update of John Gay's classic *Beggar's Opera* was integral to how that first production conceived of itself. Only later, when he revised the book for publication in his collected works in 1931, did Brecht upgrade himself from adaptor to sole author. Stephens takes far fewer liberties with the *Dreigroschenoper* than Brecht and Weill did with Gay and Pepusch's *Beggar's Opera*. In order to lend the piece a contemporary flavor, Stephens inventively revises details of the plot and dialogue—for instance, by adding Mrs. Peachum to Macheath's sexual conquests and the King to the roster of people he is able to blackmail—and also reworks the lyrics. The "rather risqué" texts of 1928 (to use Weill's description of the "Pimp's Ballad") remain just that in 2016 thanks to Stephens's brilliantly idiomatic, PG-level use of British English. An integral part of that brilliance is his finely tuned ear for text-setting, reflected in the way he manages to fit his words to Weill's melodies far better than most previous English translations and at least as well as Blitzstein's.

An Interview with Simon Stephens, 28 October 2016:

KWN: Rory Kinnear said that you went through twenty-five drafts ...

SS: Yeah, I think probably more than that in the end.

KWN: Is that the hardest you've ever had to work on a script?

SS: I don't know if it's the hardest. It's the most drawn out, the most drafts I've done. It was a very specific technical exercise, so that was interesting. And I was responding to impulses and instincts and notes from a whole load of singers and actors, and Rufus and [music director] David Shrubsole, as well as the concerns of the estates, as well as my own response to the literal translation. You've really got to be fleet-footed to negotiate all those different impulses. Sometimes that felt exhausting, but finally I think it made for quite a rich version, or at least a version I'm happy with.

KWN: What did you find to be the strengths of the original script?

SS: The music and lyrics are astonishing and stand up I think as some of the greatest songs of the century. The excavation of the world of crime and dirt remains resonant ninety years later. That hasn't dated and if anything was more exciting after U.K. voters decided to leave the European Union. The biggest surprise: I came to develop an affection for the *deus ex machina*. Both myself and Rufus ended with a sense of "Blimey! Maybe the buggers were right." The gesture at the end, which I had always been slightly skeptical about, seemed to work beautifully in performance and carry a lot of the political ideas of the play. The innate corruption of the entire social structure was dramatized by that *deus ex machina*.

KWN: Anything else?

SS: I tend to work in much smaller theaters than the Olivier. And it struck me that there was an engine underneath this apparently small-scale work that really filled the Olivier in a way that was quite rich. That was impressive.

KWN: Were there any points where you never really felt satisfied with what you did?

SS: I wonder if I should have tried to find a way to dramatize Brecht's politics more fully, rather than just concentrate on the sex and violence. The politics made a lot of sense after the Brexit vote. That was the really alarming thing. Of course, the politics of *The Threepenny Opera* depend on the version—pre-Marxist or post-Marxist. It's a schizophrenic text in a way. The post-Marxist version was much richer in its response to the rise of the right in the early thirties. And I guess that really resonates more in a post-Brexit world. Then again, the script he wrote in 1928, when



he was a younger man and his political agenda was less specific, was maybe the one that we were most drawn to.

KWN: Do you have any sense of how audiences reacted to the piece throughout the run, and if they understood what you were trying to do?

SS: Well, two things happened with the audience. First, there was a general sense of surprise that the show could be fun. That a Brecht and Weill piece could be fun, that it could be anarchic, and it could be dangerous and sexy. There was a sense among some members of the audience that that was a good thing, a pleasant surprise. Other members of the audience perhaps had a different relationship with the material, and they may have felt frustrated over an absence of what they perceived to be purity. But on the whole I think there was general enthusiasm. The audience response really changed, in a way that I hadn't foreseen, halfway through the run, after the Brexit vote.

That really resonated in London, in particular, because London as a whole voted to stay. There was a general sense of alarm about the level of disaffection throughout Britain, and a sense of fear about the power of nationalism in areas of poverty and disaffection and uncertainty—and that gap between London and poorer areas of the U.K. played into our hands. Those were exactly the themes that excited myself and Rufus and David.

KWN: A lot of people noticed the raw language—

SS: [Laughs] Yeah, that's how I roll. The world I'm writing about is criminals, prostitutes, the homeless, the despairing. And in Peachum, a fist-clenching businessman. I think the language I captured is pretty representative of how those people would've spoken. And it's fun. Theater should be transgressive and it should be anarchic. In the end it didn't feel as though we were going to a museum to revere a classic theater text. It was a great night out exploring the criminality that's a consequence of poverty in Europe. And I was excited by that.

KWN: What aspect of your work was the greatest success, from your perspective?

SS: I think the thing I'm most pleased about was the elegance with which we humanized the women. That Mrs. Peachum, that Polly Peachum, and that Jenny, to me at least, never felt like ciphers. They felt as though they were characters with agency and objectives of their own. The other thing I'm really pleased about is that we made it an exciting story that moved from scene to scene to scene and that audiences engaged with. That was really thrilling.

KWN: How would you characterize the critical response to your work? Do you think they understood what you were trying to do?

SS: I don't read any of that. I don't pay attention to them.

Recycling *The Threepenny Opera*: Simon Stephens's New Translation at London's National Theatre

After Sam Wanamaker's first English production of Weill and Brecht's popular (anti-)opera at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956—the year which also saw the Berliner Ensemble's first visit to the British capital—followed by a series of other stagings in London over the past decades, *The Threepenny Opera* is back at the National Theatre in 2016 with a daring new version of Brecht's classic. The translation was produced by playwright Simon Stephens, who is well-known for such plays as *Motortown* or *Pornography*, which investigate urgent political issues including terrorism and global warfare, as well as his stage adaptation of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Along with Mark Ravenhill, David Harrower, and Tanika Gupta, Stephens is one of many contemporary dramatists creatively engaging with Brecht's plays, which attests to the continued influence of Brechtian epic theatre on British theatre practitioners. Stephens's translation is rough, explicit, and straightforward—recycling, updating, and refreshing Brecht's original for the cultural and social context of the twenty-first century without forsaking Brecht's critical edge. It is in this spirit that director Rufus Norris brings Stephens's text to the stage, producing a vibrant, dynamic spectacle that succeeds both in entertaining the audience and in engaging them critically.

Indeed, politics is not lost in Stephens's and Norris's adaptation, despite heavy cuts to the original and despite efforts to make the sequence of events more plausible, for example by allowing the women characters, above all Mrs. Peachum (Haydn Gwynne, who perfectly embodies the reinforced revengeful and lecherous side of Mrs. Peachum), more psychological depth and agency. Even though an explicit reference to the contemporary context is not forced upon the production, resonance with current political and social conditions remains strong throughout. Watching the play on 23 June 2016, the day after the U.K.'s EU referendum, *The Threepenny Opera*'s take on politics, corruption, and economic misery represented a timely intervention. This ef-

fect is particularly underscored by Stephens's and Norris's choice to consciously set the play in the heart of London, advertised in the prologue as “a City that has gone beyond morality,” by including various direct and critical references to the British capital in the text and on stage that engage the spectators right from the outset—thereby leaving Brecht's more fictitious and historicized London, which he knew only from books and which served above all as a symbol of Berlin, behind. In this vein, Macheath's (Rory Kinnear) spontaneous greeting of the London audience, who “could have left, but decided to remain,” after the interval at the first post-referendum show added to the playful seriousness of the whole production.

It is this emphasis on fun and enjoyment—along with politics and criticism—that most characterizes this 2016 version of *The Threepenny Opera*, creating a heightened, irresolvable tension between the “culinary” and the political. Stephens's translation carves out the vulgarity, sexuality and anarchy inherent in the original, and Norris translates this intensified sexual innuendo and playfulness to the stage by using elements of pantomime and the comic as well as by introducing strong and luscious women characters, who seem diametrically opposed to the heavily feminized Peachum (Nick Holder, who easily wins over the audience with his charismatic stage presence). While the Balladeer (George Ikediashi) welcomes the audience by ironically stressing that, in this “glorious dirty ditch of a theatre,” “there will be no moralizing,” it is precisely the tension between the appeal to enjoy the “amoral” performance, this seeming lack of “moralizing” on the one hand and the clearly implied political impetus on the other which draws the audience's attention to the politics of the play. It is, in truly Brechtian spirit, a socially critical laughter and fun that results from this clash between pleasure, entertainment, and politics.

The stage design plays perhaps the most important role in embodying this clash and in conveying the political essence of

Polly (Rosalie Craig) sings the “Barbara-Song” in front of a wall of paper-covered flats



PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

Stephens's and Norris's opera for the twenty-first century. Consisting of a range of wooden stage flats covered with thin paper, Vicki Mortimer's set is characterized both by its transparency and provisionality and its Brechtian-inspired amateur style that sharply contrasts with the professionalism of the performance at one of Britain's key theater institutions. The various cardboard elements are flexibly moved around throughout the show, and characters often burst through the walls to mark their entrance, which creates highly playful moments of surprise and interruption. As the play develops, the stage flats, which serve to create an open, arena-like space at the beginning of the play, become gradually intertwined, with the musicians and the actors more and more caught up in the stage set. Therefore, what this design seems to foreground is the impossibility of drawing clear spatial and, by implication, social distinctions: in the case of *The Threepenny Opera* between the allegedly moral, correct bourgeoisie and the amoral, corrupt beggary. Indeed, it reveals to what degree these supposedly distinct realms are enmeshed with each other—as Brecht has it, the bourgeois is a robber, and vice versa.

Hence, Stephens's and Norris's production does indeed successfully take on Brecht's "suggestions," as Brecht himself wished for his legacy—while also self-reflexively foregrounding the urgent question of their usefulness and relevance for the contemporary context. By emphasizing the ambiguous distinctions between fun and politics, between play and morality at the heart of *The Threepenny Opera*, this 2016 version reflects the political relativism, doubt and uncertainty characteristic of our times. It thereby provocatively and productively interrogates not only politics, but also the theatre's relation to and place within society, and the role Brechtian epic theatre may come to play in the theatrical context of the twenty-first century.

Anja Hartl
Universität Konstanz

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PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

... certainly Brechtian ...

“Rufus Norris’s staging is certainly Brechtian, with the mechanics of the scene changes being clearly visible as characters help with, and even comment on, them. Similarly, the orchestra is situated on stage throughout, with various players, dressed as minstrels and Pierrots, walking about as they perform.”

Music OMH, 20 May 2016,
Sam Smith

... bare bones and moving parts ...

“Fun as it is to see Brecht performed in a way we might imagine the Berliner Ensemble might have wanted it, all unpretentious bare bones and moving parts, I am not sure if the politics of the show come through clearly enough. ... Rosalie Craig’s extraordinary renditions of ‘Pirate Jenny’ and the ‘Barbara Song’ give such terrifying, vengeful bite to the gender politics of the piece that the class politics fades into the background. As with much Brecht performed today, when no longer agitprop the messages can become diffuse, and even contradictory.”

The London Magazine, 27 May 2016, Fred Maynard

... alienation gimmicks ...

“Norris doesn’t overdo the Brechtian alienation gimmicks: a few gestures, such as a barked ‘Scene Change’ or ‘Interval,’ nod in the direction of ‘epic.’ There are some self-knowing shrugs, as when Macheath hustles a saxophonist off the stage, or snarls at us after the interval, ‘So, you came back!’ but they’re not overly intrusive.”

Opera Today, 31 May 2016, Claire Seymour

Tazewell Thompson, award-winning playwright and director:

I found the adaptation to be unfussy, direct, lean, raw, tough, hard, yet full of color and poetry: a really thrilling character-driven examination of Brecht’s original book.

The whole look of the show: vivid daring costumes, superb lighting, scary props and staircases, and the bursting through the paper settings—so astonishingly Brechtian.

I was genuinely struck by the inventive staging and courageous casting. The singing was perfectly suited to Weill’s score. Bravo all around!

Proofing the Pudding: *Threepenny* in English

by Michael Morley

My first ever exposure to *Die Dreigroschenoper* (during the Berliner Ensemble's 1965 visit to London) left two unforgettable impressions: the image of Wolf Kaiser, gliding across the stage like some blue-suited, definitely middle-aged shark, occasionally giving short shrift to those who crossed his path, and above all, performing the most sinuous, seemingly lazy tango in his duet with Jenny, all the while with one hand resting in his trouser pocket.

The other impression was less favorable, and has, alas, been repeated down the years more times than I care to remember: how much longer will this piece ramble on for? As directed by Erich Engel, I suspect that every sentence, stage direction and punctuation mark from Brecht's 1931 expanded literary text was included. Giorgio Strehler's first production of the work, which Brecht saw in Milan in 1956, ran from 9:30 p.m. until 2 a.m. in a run-through, according to a letter to Ruth Berlau. These days, no director would contemplate presenting the work, as Strehler did in 1956, in its uncut form. Neither Brecht nor the work is served by such obsequious fidelity to the text on the page. Many years ago, the Australian playwright and filmwriter Nick Enright (Oscar-nominated for his script for *Lorenzo's Oil*) observed to me

after viewing a performance of the work on which I was musical director: "It's always worth seeing, but the script really is a dog's breakfast"—going on to add that there were so many good things in it, but it needed tightening and cutting, while keeping the qualities that made it "Brechtian."

Even the less muddled, original 1928 text cries out for such attention—though preferably at the hands of an adaptor who knows German and has some understanding of the play's juxtaposition of the comic with the caustic, of (admittedly crude) social satire with what Brecht termed "Spaß" (a notion whose constituent elements are not fully covered by the usual English translation, "fun"). And while it has become a critical truism that it is Weill's music that justifies the work's regular revivals (a belief probably traceable to Alfred Kerr's 1929 assertion that "without the music ... it's a dud"), it can be argued that the Brecht/Hauptmann/Gay text has its points, provided it is not treated in either too cavalier or, at the other extreme, too reverent a fashion.

Back in 1990, John Willett summarised a number of obstacles to what he termed good 'Anglo-Brecht' (which refers to any English-language productions). Over the years too many English-language stagings/translations/adaptations have continued, alas, to validate his observations, and, it is worth singling out a few: "self-importance" (i.e., of the actors); designers' "love of spectacle"; "strained topicality" (directors making the play contemporary whatever the cost); "Anglicization" (cozy for the actors, but disastrous for the play); "having the translation done by well-known writers, unaccustomed to Brecht's original language." It is hardly accidental, given Willett's own blind spots, that Weill's music is absent from this outline of problematic aspects of production or adaptation—though I am fairly certain that the Salzburg re-orchestration of Weill's score, ostensibly to bring it into line with modern large-scale musicals, would have drawn his ire on the basis of several of the above categories.

In a discussion with Strehler at the time of his highly influential 1956 production, Brecht emphasized an aspect of "epic theatre" which, in English-language productions, still tends to be overlooked. Taking their cue from a belief that Brecht's Marxism/dialectical/epic/"alienated" theatre needs to be incorporated at every level, directors favor an approach that, most of the time, struggles to hide a suppressed, politically correct rage at the social injustices the play mentions. They invariably encourage a performance mode which suggests that at any moment the actors are about to mount a barricade or platform, ensuring that the audience grasps the anger beneath even the most subtle song. Such misdirection could easily be avoided simply by noting Brecht's words to Strehler: "... our own acting ... was only partly epic. It always worked best in comedies, since they anyway entail a measure of alienation. ... It was a good idea generally to stage plays more or less as comedies."

Beware, then, the temptation, so prevalent today, to adhere uncritically to so-called "Brechtian" principles, many of which have been attributed to Brecht without understanding their context or intent. Brecht's own relaxed approach to the play in production confirms one of his favorite sayings ("the proof of the pudding is in the eating"). Although he later toyed with adding to the work's socio-critical elements (in the revised 1931 text,



Wolf Kaiser (Macheath) dances, hand in pocket, with Felicitas Ritsch (Jenny) in the 1965 Berliner Ensemble production

PHOTO: VERA TENSCHEIT

Theodore S. Chapin, president of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization:

I didn't know what to expect when I went to see "Thruhp'ny Opera" at the National. What I found was perhaps the clearest modern translation, one that defined the whole notion of what an "opera for beggars" really meant and means. It's the most theatrically focused adaptation I can remember, constructing a play that tells a real story that gets across to the audience. It felt like a "people's opera" in which the music served the storytelling, allowing the composer's voice to stay in lockstep with the plot without feeling like "now here we are in Germany in the 1920's." The adaptation by Simon Stephens was always interesting—yes, more scatological than others, but it's a story about the underbelly of society, so what the hell. I loved Kinnear, and pretty much the rest as well. The audience went for it big-time. Simply by refusing to be intimidated by a classic, director Rufus Norris and the company found an honesty and dramatic through-line that isn't often seen in *Threepenny*.

his radically modified script for the film version, and, more successfully, in *The Threepenny Novel*), even in 1928 we find him candidly acknowledging the work's less than revolutionary qualities in a letter to Erwin Piscator: "There's nothing false about it, she's a pretty good honest sort. The fact that it's a hit is very agreeable. That gives the lie to the general view that you can't satisfy the public—something I find just a touch disappointing."

Such observations provide a neat example of Brecht's *grobe Dialektik*, along with confirmation of his declared conviction that "anyone without a sense of humor can't understand dialectics." The dialectical juxtaposition of the underworld with the bourgeoisie, of the beggars with the (would-be) bankers in *The Threepenny Opera* is elegantly (and humorously) summed up in the following little-known passage:

A philosopher produces ideas, a poet poems. ... A criminal produces crimes. A closer consideration of the connection of this last branch of production with society *in toto* enables one to step back from a wide range of prejudices. The criminal produces the whole police and criminal justice set-up: ... judges, hangmen, etc., and all of these develop different capabilities of the human mind, create new needs and new means of satisfying them. ... The criminal produces art as well, *belles-lettres*, novels, even tragedies. He interrupts the monotony and everyday certainties of bourgeois life, thereby preserving it from stagnation. ... And leaving aside the sphere of private crime: Without national crimes, would there ever be a global market?

This is a fine example of what, many years ago, one critic singled out—with a motto clearly derived from the world of *The*

Threepenny Opera—as the feature of so many of Brecht's works with a social thrust: "laughter while the shark bites." The task facing any adaptor or director of the piece is to give stage time to both activities, along with the other dualities which characterize it: tough, direct lyrics and haunting or catchy melody; parody and (occasional) sobriety; what Stephen Hinton refers to as "sentimentality and critical bite (hanging) in the balance"; adaptation versus adherence to the text; even Marxism and humor. (The passage quoted above is not, of course, from any of Brecht's notes on *The Threepenny Opera*, but from the pen of that not quite so well-known humorist, Karl Marx.)

In the case of the adaptation vs. the original, however, the playwright did propose an approach which over-zealous translators/cutters/adaptors might do well to keep in mind. In the 1950s, Brecht had spent considerable time re-working, slashing, adjusting Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*—before discarding much of his adaptation and punningly suggesting that what he had learnt from the exercise could be summed up as follows: "Wir können den Shakespeare ändern, wenn wir ihn ändern können" [italics in original]. (We can mess around with Shakespeare, if we know what the hell we're doing.) A consummation devoutly to be wished ...



Matthias (Jamie Beddard) and Betty (Rebecca Brewer)

Richard C. Norton, author of *A Chronology of American Musical Theatre*:

The National Theatre's live broadcast of Weill and Brecht's classic is a bracing, raucous musical theater adventure. NT artistic director Rufus Norris offers us a new *Threepenny* that is outrageous, controversial, wildly entertaining, yet true to the original creators' intent.

If Weill's score and orchestrations are faithfully rendered, Simon Stephens's libretto takes liberties with Brecht's plot particulars and characterizations. The lyrics eschew the easy or obvious rhyme. Vicious wit, crude ripostes, emotional cruelty, vulgar sex, and cynical manipulation define his prose and verse, and it all serves Brecht and Weill well. What would have shocked Berlin in 1928 or New York in 1954 may not have such an effect now, so Stephens has raised the stakes, especially with regards to cross-dressing and promiscuous sexuality. While Brecht's politics, rich vs. poor, and the corruption of privilege are still intact, Stephens's adaptation is less preachy and didactic, a relief for modern audiences.

If you were not fortunate enough to see *Threepenny* live at the National, this high-def presentation does it proud. The film zeroes in for close-ups, then pans back out to full stage views, yet loses nothing of the epic staging at the Olivier. The sound is impeccable. If only NT.live could cut back on its overbearing and repetitious self-promotion, which starts a full thirty minutes before the performance and is hammered home again in an interview with Rufus Norris during intermission. The heavy-handed marketing soured an otherwise perfect evening.

3 Pennies in English

by Kim H. Kowalke

After more than 25 drafts and almost four years of intermittent but intensive labor, Simon Stephens has no assurance that his new version of *The Threepenny Opera* will outlive the National Theatre's run of some 83 performances. In fact, of the dozen or so previous English-language versions of the play, only four are currently authorized for ongoing performances. Any new translation or adaptation has a tough time establishing itself as an alternative to those already being licensed for performances by professional, regional, community, and educational theaters. Rarely has a newcomer done so without benefit of a cast recording, a published script and/or vocal score, a telecast or broadcast, or a long-running, critically acclaimed, well-attended inaugural production. None of the existing versions has enjoyed *all* of the above, but each claimed at least one such distinction.

One might well wonder why anyone would take on the insanely difficult task of making a new version of so iconic a piece of musical theater, other than as a labor of love. The percentage of authors' royalties in such cases rarely exceeds 15%, commissions and/or advances are at best modest, and rarely is there any assurance of a life after the initial production. I can't imagine anyone undertaking such a task on spec, with the vague hope of production sometime in the future. Translating lyrics from German is a formidable task, but translating Brecht's idiosyncratic poetic language so that it sings in English is a near-impossible one. It's entirely understandable that major theaters or producers want the cachet of the premiere of a new version and why directors feel they can embed some of their ideas in it as it evolves. But only an eternal optimist or a glutton for punishment could consider the guaranteed compensation for creating a new version sufficient to repay the effort. Of course, in Marc Blitzstein's case, it turned out to be a bonanza, from which he reaped financial rewards and artistic accolades surpassing those accorded to any of his own works.

Prior to the premiere of his "English adaptation" at Brandeis University in 1952, with Lenya in a cast conducted by Leonard Bernstein, no predecessor had managed to sustain itself in the market. The first, by Jerrold Krinsky and Gifford Cochran, did not survive its twelve-performance run on Broadway in 1933; not even a single copy of the script is known to have survived. In Britain, C. Denis Freeman's translation fared no better, with just two ill-received concert performances: one broadcast by the

BBC in 1935; the other comprising only excerpts semi-staged by The Opera Group in London in 1938. By then a fellow Brit, Desmond Vesey, had translated Brecht's *Dreigroschenroman* under the title "A Penny for the Poor" and interpolated lyrics from the stage work, translated rather unmusically by Christopher Isherwood. Vesey completed a literal translation of the stage work later that year, and it was this version that was performed in 1946 at the University of Illinois and in 1948 at Northwestern University, both productions instigated and attended by Eric Bentley, acting as Brecht's *de facto* American agent at the time. When the Vesey translation was published in 1949, credit was shared with Bentley, who apparently had reworked most of the lyrics in the interim. Although there were a few unauthorized additional productions in the 1950s, the overwhelming popularity of Blitzstein's version prevented Vesey/Bentley from being licensed for subsequent stage performances. It has, however, remained in print continuously, and some of Bentley's lyrics were used in the English-language make-over of Wolfgang Staudte's 1962 German-language *Dreigroschen*-film.

With an off-Broadway run of 2,707 total performances between 1954 and 1961 and a cast album (now available as Decca Broadway 012 159 463-2) that sold more copies in five years than any besides *My Fair Lady*, Blitzstein's version swept through the English-speaking theatrical scene and spun off ten million recordings of the worldwide hit, "Mack the Knife." No subsequent translation has been able to overwrite its imprint on public consciousness. Perhaps because Blitzstein was himself both a composer and lyricist, no translation has successfully challenged the sheer "singability" of his version, and, sixty years later, it remains the most frequently produced *Threepenny* in English. Given the old saw, "Great Britain and the United States are two countries divided by a common language," it's probably not surprising that Blitzstein's adaptation never achieved the popularity on- or off-stage across the Atlantic that it did in North America, despite a major production at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. Because neither a script nor a complete piano-vocal score has ever been offered for sale, Blitzstein's complete text and score are available only for rental or perusal from the Rodgers & Hammerstein Theater Library, which licenses stage rights throughout the world.

After Blitzstein, the next three translations all originated in England. Hugh MacDiarmid's lasted approximately 165 performances on the West End in 1972 and appeared in print the following year. Ralph Manheim and John Willett's debuted with a run of 307 performances in 1976 in a New York Shakespeare Festival production at Lincoln Center. Its original cast recording on Columbia, preserving Stanley Silverman's expanded orchestrations for an ensemble similar to that of *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, has been reissued on CD (Sony Broadway Masterworks 51520). Lenya disliked the translation because it was an uncritical, literal translation of Brecht's 1931 literary version (as was MacDiarmid's) rather than the 1928 stage



Premiere of Blitzstein's version at Brandeis, 1952. Far left: Leonard Bernstein; center: Lotte Lenya; far right (seated): Marc Blitzstein

script; she found it un-musical and un-funny. She and Stefan Brecht refused to allow further performances in North America, but it can be produced elsewhere. It appeared in print in 1977, with elaborate notes, including Brecht's own from the 1931 literary version, which attempted to sabotage the piece's runaway popular success. Robert David MacDonald's translation, again of the 1931 version, premiered precisely thirty years ago at the National Theatre in London, running for 72 performances that were neither well reviewed nor well received. It remains unpublished. The script resurfaced, however, in 1994 at the Donmar Warehouse in London for a three-month run, but on that occasion with new lyrics commissioned from Jeremy Sams. The original cast album of the Donmar production (JAY Records CDJAY 1244) afforded sufficient exposure and accessibility to warrant authorization for secondary licensing, but neither script nor lyrics have been published. In contrast, Frank McGuinness's translation for production by Dublin's Gate Theatre in 1991 has had no further outings.

The first American attempt at a post-Blitzstein translation came for a Broadway production in 1989 starring Sting as Macheath. Catastrophically miscast and misdirected, it managed only 65 performances; no cast recording was issued despite a big-name star. But Michael Feingold's lyrics were subsequently included in the German-English piano-vocal score published in 2002, matching the new critical edition of the work. Feingold's version, based on the 1928 stage script, joined the MacDonald-Sams and Manheim-Willett translations as authorized for sec-

ondary licensing by European American Music Corp. in various territories. *Threepenny's* next staging on Broadway in 2006 at the Roundabout Theatre showcased another new translation based on the 1928 script, this one by well-known actor/author/playwright Wallace Shawn. But the production, starring Alan Cumming, was unanimously pummeled by critics and ran just 77 performances, *sans* cast album or publication of Shawn's translation.

And now, ten years later, the fate of Simon Stephens's "new English version" is still uncertain. Methuen was poised to publish the script in time for it to be sold during the run of the production, but Suhrkamp Verlag insisted that sales be restricted to the National Theatre building, which rendered the project economically impractical. Written by a Tony and Olivier Award-winning playwright, widely praised by critics and palpably enjoyed by audiences, Stephens's version may find an afterlife, nevertheless, because of its distinction as the first musical to be included in the National Theatre Live! Series, cinema screenings of the production which will continue to be seen around the world for the next twelve months.

Once final decisions have been made about publication or secondary licensing of the Stephens version, there will be a press release and announcement in professional and industry journals and media. Meanwhile, interested producers can peruse the final version of his script at the Weill-Lenya Research Center and view the National Theatre Live! film in local cinemas, or ask the Foundation for access to password-protected streaming.

Excerpt from Act III, Scene 7 in Simon Stephens's adaptation

Filch grabs Jenny from behind. He drags her to a chair that Peachum holds out for him.

Peachum grabs Jenny's hand. He takes a finger. She screams.

Jenny Get off me. Get your filthy fucking hands off me you scraggly shite.

Peachum I'm going to ask you a question. You have one chance to answer it, lovely. If you refuse or hesitate or lie I'll break your finger. Do you understand me?

Jenny Shut the fuck up you fucking fuck.

Peachum I said do you understand me?

Jenny I'm not scared of you. You're nothing. You hear me, fuckface? Nothing.

Peachum Gosh, we do have a temper on us don't we? Where is he? Where is he, Jenny? Where's Macheath?

Jenny I'm not telling you nothing. Nothing. No. No. No.

He breaks her finger. She screams. The others find it difficult to watch. He grabs another one.

Peachum That was unnecessary. Silly really.

Mrs. Peachum This is all his idea isn't it, Jenny? You coming here. He wants your bribe money, doesn't he? He sent you here to get it. He's so chivalrous.

Peachum I'll ask you again. Please don't think I won't break another one. Because I will. Where is he?

Peachum approaches with scissors.

Peachum Where is he, Jenny?

Jenny He's in my room. At Grape Lane.

Peachum Smart feller. See. Easy that, wasn't it. Why didn't you do that in the first place? Such a silly sausage.

Jenny is released. She is in agony. She almost falls over.

Two stanzas for Mrs. Peachum

Second Threepenny Finale

You say we need to live with grace and virtue
And keep our filthy feelings out of sight.
You're scared our darkest dealings will pervert you
Well, let me tell you, sunshine, that ain't right.
Debauchery is nothing to a starving man,
A vice is not a vice when there's no food.
Take your hypocrisy and shove it down the can,
Don't judge the screwing when we've just been screwed.
And then just ask yourself, say, what would you choose
If you were ever standing here in our shoes?

The Ballad of Lust and Desire (Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit)

But now the hero's neck is ripe for hanging,
And in his head he hears the death knell clanging,
An icy wind descends, the frost is gnawing,
And what does Mackie think about but whoring?
It doesn't matter what the cost may be,
He can't control his sexuality.
We'll pick apart his empire, liquidise his assets
Wipe the smile from off his sorry face.
And only then he'll start to understand
That women rule this sorry race.
His ugly face will be bemused and baffled
Because his cock has led him to the scaffold.