

Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel

Kurt Weill Edition, Series I, Volume 3 Edited by Giselher Schubert

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Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel marked the start of Kurt Weill's rich collaboration with Bertolt Brecht and the initiation of a compositional style for the theater quite distinct from his previous stage works. A critical success at the premiere in Baden-Baden in 1927, it considerably enhanced his reputation (and notoriety). Among his pre-war pieces, however, it suffered more than most from subsequent misrepresentation, confusion, and negligence. Suppressed as a rival to the full-length opera, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, and performed later in three much modified versions thrown together mostly out of expedience, the Songspiel's true character remained unrecognized and indeed quite unknown for thirty years after the premiere, despite its bold originality and immense importance to Weill's *oeuvre*.

The Introduction to the newly published critical edition—the first publication of the full score—recounts the genesis and career of the Songspiel in great detail from Weill and Brecht's first meetings through the composition, rehearsals, and the premiere to the modified (one might say corrupted) versions of 1932 and 1949, drawing on letters, documents, eyewitness accounts, and contemporary reviews. Many facts were new to me: for example, a single performance of the original work took place in Altona, near Hamburg, in 1932; the “Paris version” performances later that year were hugely successful and received extraordinary critical praise. The breakneck speed of the initial enterprise is astonishing: begun in early May, the Songspiel was composed in little over two weeks and finished barely two months before the first performance on 17 July. This is breathtaking, especially when one considers that the singers (except Lenya) also performed in the three other new operas on the program. A striking note from the premiere: the 1927 production began with a pistol shot, which reminds us that the piece is inextricably bound up with a certain kind of violence.

As the editor explains, there are only a few sources for the musical text: a holograph full score, a copyist's piano-vocal score, and a rehearsal part prepared for Irene Eden, who sang the role of Bessie at the premiere. Other surviving sources are useful but not crucial: draft fragments, reworked material from *Aufstieg*, the spurious Venice version of 1949, arrangements of the instantly popular “Alabama-Song,” and various libretto and textual sources. However, numerous revisions, cuts, and annotations are marked in the main sources by different “scribes” in addition to Weill himself. (Mehlich, the first conductor? the repetiteur? the assistant stage director? Perhaps all of these and others, too.) A full score was not printed by Universal Edition, so Weill's holograph was used to rehearse and perform the first production and again later by conductor Maurice Abravanel to prepare the “Paris version” (repeated in London and Rome) which

interpolated new, re-orchestrated numbers extracted from the full opera. The piano-vocal score was prepared several months after the first performance, and though it is not in Weill's hand, there is good reason to believe that he authorized the variants found within. Both scores accreted many layers of markings and revisions that require careful deciphering and make editorial choices far from easy.

The editor surmises that the full score contains decisions made or sanctioned by Weill as he responded to particular issues with the performers (especially Lenya) and the production during rehearsals. However, the piano-vocal score, which preserves the original production staging details, does not contain all of the full score revisions and differs on many points, some quite substantial. Did Weill take the opportunity to make a version of the Songspiel for future use shorn of what he considered unrepresentative or performer-specific details from the premiere production? Acknowledging these contradictions and the fact that neither source is completely error-free or has documented authority from Weill, the editor has struck a careful balance between the two sources while filtering out markings related to Paris (1932) and Venice (1949) versions.

How does the new edition compare to the existing (rental only) full score? That was prepared by David Drew in 1963 using the same sources. Drew later admitted some dissatisfaction with his edition, but his efforts did put the original Songspiel back into circulation for the first time in over thirty years. It's impossible to say what guided his editorial choices, and although differences with the new edition are not profound, many new details are important and telling. Principal structural changes in the new edition include a repeat of the ten middle bars of the *Kleiner Marsch* after the “Alabama-Song,” segueing into the following instrumental prelude (thereby creating an unprepared tempo shift) and the removal of an optional cut of the second strophe of the “Alabama-Song.” Elsewhere, Jessie's spoken line (shouted through a megaphone) in “III. Mahagonny-Song” has been removed; in the finale, spoken lines are dovetailed with the instrumental ensemble with much greater ease and comprehensibility. Just as important (or perhaps even more) are the corrections of numerous errors and omissions, including various vocal interjections, time signatures, rhythms, and pitches. Inconsistencies are rectified (Weill was not the most meticulous proofreader), miscalculations noted (saxophone pitches notated outside its range), and enigmas explored (what exactly is a *Jazztrommel*?). The new score and parts are therefore much more consistent and clear. Having conducted a performance from this edition prior to publication, I can attest to the extra energy, drive, and focus it imparts to the playing and singing as well as the advantages of a modern, well laid out printed score and parts. (Drew's full score was not engraved but copied neatly by hand.)

The separate Critical Report contains detailed descriptions and evaluations of the sources, the reasoning behind the editorial choices, and brief, deft comments on matters of tempo indications, dynamics, articulation, and metronome markings. (My feeling is that tempos for the Songspiel should be sought without reference to the corresponding music in *Aufstieg*, as the

latter is considerably reworked and the dramatic trajectory wholly different.) There is a detailed list of important differences between the sources which includes alternatives not included in the score and parts, such as Bessie's *Trillervariation* in the "Alabama-Song" and a florid violin passage in the finale. These could therefore be added in performance, though I see no compelling reason to do so. Also included is a complete scenario with stage directions from the 1927 production copied by an unknown hand into the copyist's piano-vocal score. It contains costume and character descriptions (presumably sanctioned by Brecht) as well as lighting (which emerges as an extremely important expressive scenic element) and image projection cues. A condensed version of the scenario was published in Drew's vocal score (second edition, 1968), but it is much better to have complete in the new edition as it is invaluable for a deeper understanding of the expression and physicality of the *Songspiel* through the original scenic elements. Included alongside the scenario are the poems that Weill selected for the libretto, as first published in Brecht's *Hauspostille*.

The critical edition is handsomely designed and printed.

Eight facsimile score pages in color, production photographs, and a page from the original program are reproduced; the complete libretto is also included. The introduction and extensive notes are informative, comprehensive, and cogent; the wealth of detail is always relevant and never overwhelming. Score and parts are consistent and set forth the music with great clarity. The editorial choices are persuasive in resolving the conflicting markings in the sources with good sense, a strong understanding of the spirit and substance of the music and drama, and careful balancing of Weill's intentions with the expressive details of the first production. Congratulations are due to editor Giseler Schubert and managing editor Elmar Juchem for producing such an excellent volume. *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel* has benefited from their meticulous and well-judged work and emerges more vividly than ever from its tangled relationship with *Aufstieg* and the hybrid versions that obscured it from view.

Philip Headlam
London

Kurt Weill – Herbert Ihering: Correspondence Brought to Light Elmar Juchem

The critical edition of *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel* had just appeared when I came across a collection of correspondence between Weill and critic Herbert Ihering (1888–1977), whose papers are housed in the archives of Berlin's Akademie der Künste. Although the handful of letters and postcards have no significant bearing on the genesis of the *Songspiel*, they offer intriguing information about this phase in Weill's career. Two telegrams and a postcard show that Ihering and his common-law wife, the actress Lisette Königshof (along with her son Kaspar), became friendly with Weill and Lenya in the summer of 1926. Both couples vacationed on the Riviera—the Iherings on the French side, the Weills on the Italian—and made plans to meet in Genoa to take the same train back to Berlin on 15 July 1926. The first encounter between Weill and Ihering may have taken place only three months earlier, when both attended a performance of *Der Protagonist* in Dresden on 14 April.

Ihering, one of the most influential theater critics in Weimar Germany, had been instrumental in promoting Bertolt Brecht's career. In 1922, he had published a groundbreaking review of Brecht's *Drums in the Night* and saw to it that the young playwright received the prestigious Kleist Prize. As Ihering and Brecht stayed in frequent contact thereafter, one can't help but wonder if Ihering may have played a role in introducing him to Weill. The critic attended the premiere of Weill's *Royal Palace* on 2 March 1927 and reviewed the publication of Brecht's *Hauspostille* on 30 April in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*. Possibly that review (or a conversation with Ihering?) brought the collection of poems, which became the basis of the *Songspiel*, to Weill's attention.

On 22 June 1927, Weill sent Ihering a letter (see partial translation below) that foreshadows Weill's essay "Shifts in Musical Production," published in the fall of that year. And his

complaints about the "brooding, academic atmosphere" of a festival in Krefeld (where *Quodlibet* op. 9 was performed) may have prompted the irreverent credo in Weill's own program note for the premiere of the *Songspiel*: "He already addresses an audience that naively demands its fun in the theater." Weill alluded to this attack on the avant-garde in a postcard (pictured below) sent to Ihering on the day of the dress rehearsal.

Weill to Ihering, 22 June 1927

[first paragraph omitted]

The new Kaiser opera [*Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*] is coming along nicely. Klemperer is interested in the world premiere (along with *Protagonist*), but the institutional situation is a complete mess and no one knows when Klemperer can start (there is no chance before December!).

The music festival in Krefeld was dreadful. The artistic level was incredibly low, accompanied by a brooding, academic atmosphere. Everywhere you encounter misunderstanding and ill will. Only the smallest fraction (and certainly not a single music critic!) can take the step from yesterday to today, which is apparently much more important than the one from day before yesterday to yesterday. In 1919, a lot of people at least had good intentions. Even those are gone today. Apparently we have looked in the wrong place for too long in our effort to connect. We can no longer expect anything from the chamber music fuddy-duddies.

Left: Weill's postcard to Ihering, postmarked 16 July 1927, also includes brief messages from Lenya and music critic Heinrich Strobel. Weill's text reads, "Heute war Generalprobe. Unser Wahlspruch: Kein Tag ohne Spass." (Today was the dress rehearsal. Our motto: never a day without fun.) The postcard is reproduced with the kind permission of the Akademie der Künste.



Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Municipal de Santiago

23 June – 1 July 2016

Successful opera production in today's world results from a strong link between pit and stage, suitable casting, and a director's concept that permits the introduction of contemporary ideas and cutting-edge technology yet does not distort the work. The Chilean premiere of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* had all these qualities. Its success is bound to attract new audiences to the Municipal de Santiago.

Banned by Hitler and always controversial, Weill and Brecht's opera (premiered 1930 in Leipzig) triumphed here because of its evocative—and at times disturbing and violent—music, but above all because the various artistic disciplines involved came together like clockwork to deliver this musical and theatrical denunciation, which is at once a political message, a warning to society (it was written between the two world wars), and an esthetic proclamation. Even though this is very definitely a German opera, and performed as such, it does include two numbers in English: the “Alabama-Song” near the beginning and the “Benares-Song” toward the end. The well-known “Alabama-Song” is a kind of farewell hymn sung by Jenny and the girls, who must become prostitutes after leaving their homeland and arriving in Mahagonny, where everything is permitted if you can pay for it, and the only official crime is having no money.

Marcelo Lombardero's stage direction, with set design and multimedia by Diego Siliano and costumes by Luciana Gutman, made effective use of the theater's space and took full advantage of technological means—digital screens, projections, and “live” television broadcasts—to utilize every corner of the auditorium. Their achievement is extraordinary because no element of the staging came across as artificial or excessive. They created contexts that were bleak at times, brutal at others, and showed convincingly just how vile humanity can be. On one level, the multimedia devices depict the brothel and casino environments in all their squalor, but they also convey the difficulty of contemporary human communication despite the fact that today's technology allows information to travel faster than ever.

The blocking and management of onstage action (choreography by Ignacio González) always proved engaging. The actors moved smoothly without clogging the stage, while the singers' interactions produced spot-on dramatic effects and that rare control produced by a balance of tragedy, perversity, and humor. González's contributions made an impression in the typhoon, gluttony, and carnal love scenes, but particularly during the trial and condemnation of Jimmy Mahoney, where a group of topless dancers performed in the style of the Lido de Paris. All these elements compelled us to reflect and created crushing emotional tension.

From beginning to end, Maestro David Syrus displayed a firm mastery of this strikingly varied score which includes nods



Jakob (Paul Kauffmann) eats himself to death during the Gluttony Scene in Act II.

PHOTO: PATRICIO MELO

to so many composers and genres—Wagner, Weber, ragtime, blues, gospel, counterpoint, Bach-like fugues. He maintained his tempos very precisely and drew expressive playing from the musicians when it was most needed to bring out dramatically effective moments, culminating in the opera's climax. We were treated to instrumental perfection, incisive musicianship, and deep-rooted engagement with the drama. And the conductor achieved all this without neglecting the cast, who must deliver true operatic singing along with dramatic declamation and *Sprechgesang*.

The production also relied on the chorus of the Municipal, conducted by Jorge Klastornick, which delivered a flawless performance. The principal cast comprised solid singers who are also fine actors, nearly all of them with sufficient vocal strength to support this powerful and intelligent dramatic construction. Austrian tenor Nikolai Schukoff was admirable not only for his poise and ability to use his singing voice to convey character and personality, but also for his dramatic delivery (even tossing off a speech in Spanish!); he was truly heart-rending in the prison scene. Argentine soprano María Victoria Gaeta did all right as Jenny, although her voice lacked power, and she did not generate the vocal color needed for the part. However, she developed her character convincingly. Susanne Resmark imposed her vision of Begbick on us through sheer stage presence. She worked very well with her accomplices, the excellent Kim Begley (Fatty) and Gregg Baker (Moses), whose close connection with her was made plain both in the words and in the music.

**Juan Antonio Muñoz H.
Santiago**

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Der Lindberghflug/Der Ozeanflug

Saint Louis Symphony

16–17 September 2016

Weill and Brecht's *Der Lindberghflug* formed the centerpiece of the St. Louis Symphony's season opener in September, celebrating the 90th anniversary of Lindbergh's 1927 flight from New York to Paris. A fifteen-movement cantata, it calls for orchestra, chorus, and three soloists, one of whom portrays Lindbergh himself. The work exists in multiple versions. In 1929, both Weill and Hindemith set movements of Brecht's text as a joint radio cantata. Later that year, Weill set Brecht's entire text himself. In 1950, Brecht revised the text in response to Lindbergh's isolationist stance and pro-German statements prior to U.S. entry in World War II, changed the title to *Der Ozeanflug*, and eliminated Lindbergh's name. The St. Louis Symphony presented the 1929 version of the Weill-Brecht work, the only one now authorized for performance.

The orchestra maintained fidelity to Weill's score, but it also added several creative glosses to *Der Lindberghflug*. The added touches evoked a 1920s view of Lindbergh's feat—a genuine media sensation and an astonishing technological and human achievement. Using Lys Symonette's English translation, the soloists spoke and sang into 1920s radio microphones. The performance also included a substantial, newly written text for narrator. Customarily, the narrator simply announces each movement's title, but here, St. Louis radio host Charlie Brennan created and read a short introduction for each movement. Brennan's present-tense account, radio microphone, and newscaster's delivery gave a sense of breaking news about the flight. Before the "The City of New York Addresses the Ships," for example, we learned, "Lindbergh is in the air traveling one hundred miles per hour. New Yorkers gather on Broadway hoping to receive bulletins on the Times Square Building. . . . For Lindbergh, it's water in all directions. Completely alone in his plane, he relies on one engine to make the expected thirty-six-hour flight."

The added narration augments the original text considerably, but I found it effective. Brennan's specific and detailed commentary illuminated the stakes for Lindbergh as well as the public. For present-day audiences who take transatlantic flight for granted, it made sense of the cantata's preoccupation with Lindbergh's equipment (one movement is a conversation between the pilot and his motor) and final proclamation that Lindbergh has achieved "the unattainable."

The performers offered a compelling rendition of the work. Tenor Clark Sturdevant brought a lyrical, restrained voice to Lindbergh. His first two solo numbers include declamatory lines that list facts about the aviator and his equipment; here, Sturdevant offered a

determined, confident hero without machismo or bravado. He gave qualities of youthful vulnerability and wonder to other passages that suggest the aviator's awareness of the challenges before him: a rounded, minor-key phrase on the words "I will fly alone," for example, and a soaring but *piano* melisma on "I'll be flying sev'ral thousand [miles]" through which Sturdevant floated effortlessly. Other performers were equally effective. Bass Mark Freiman's warm, resonant tone was especially well-suited for a duet in which he tempts the exhausted aviator: "Sleep, Charlie." Bass-baritone Jeffrey Heyl gave punch and urgency to his lines—for example, when he portrayed a Scottish fisherman reacting in disbelief to the sound of a plane over the Atlantic. The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and Chorus rendered Weill's textures with crystalline clarity, from the neoclassical counterpoint depicting Atlantic fog to the *a cappella* chorus of French newspapers.

Like the added props and narration, the other works on the program offered creative, if less obvious, commentary on *Der Lindberghflug*. None had any historical link to Weill, Brecht, or aviation, but the program notes, pre-concert talk, and advertising encouraged us to hear them in relation to the flight. Scott Andrews performed Boulez's *Dialogue de l'ombre double* for live and recorded solo clarinet. The live clarinetist engages a pre-recorded solo in an intricate exchange of motives and sonorities. Robertson suggested that the work evoked a complex soliloquy such as Lindbergh might have had on his flight. Drawing a different connection, Eddie Silva's program notes likened the virtuosic work to a daring solo flight in which the soloist must rely on both skill and equipment. Debussy's *La Mer*, the orchestra's website promised, evoked "the beautiful waves and winds of the Atlantic" above which "the *Spirit of St. Louis* soared triumphantly"—though we might well hear not only beauty but fearsome power in Debussy's extravagant climaxes, with Weill and Brecht's depiction of nature as a daunting adversary fresh in our ears.

Alexander Stefaniak
Washington University in St. Louis



Note: In view of Lindbergh's controversial attitude toward the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, Bertolt Brecht announced in 1950 on the occasion of a radio broadcast of Der Lindberghflug by the Süddeutsche Rundfunk that the title of this cantata must be changed henceforth to "Ozeanflug." He also unilaterally declared that an explanatory prologue must be added and any mention of Lindbergh in the text that Weill had set to music must be deleted or changed to "Der Flieger" (the flier). Weill was already dead, so he could not respond. Subsequently both creators' viewpoints have been reflected in the dual title and the prefatory prologue, while keeping intact Weill's original setting and compositional interpretation.

Frontispiece of *Wir zwei*, the German edition of Lindbergh's account of his trans-Atlantic flight (Brockhaus, 1927).

Royal Palace

Opéra de Montpellier

10–16 June 2016

Weill's operas before *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which include *Der Protagonist* and *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*, placed him alongside Hindemith as one of Germany's most promising young stage composers. *Royal Palace* was premiered on the composer's twenty-seventh birthday (in 1927) at the Berlin Staatsoper, conducted by none other than Erich Kleiber. It was not a great success, in part due to Ivan Goll's clumsy surrealist libretto, which tells the story of the *femme fatale* Dejanira. Her discontent with her husband, her former lover, and her future lover—all of whom seek to entice her with extravagant visions of life in their company—lead her to drown herself in the lake near the luxury hotel named in the title. The original production ran only six performances, and the publisher records just one further performance before 1933. Only a piano score survived the war; Gunther Schuller and Noam Sheriff orchestrated it in a style reminiscent of Weill's more mature works. This version was first performed (as a ballet) in 1968. Weill's musical language is more astringent and self-consciously "modern" than in his later works, with a nod to his teacher Busoni; the opening bells and chorus call to mind the beginning of his master's musical testament, *Doktor Faust*. The initial gesture soon gives way to the composer's distinctive musical language, with a saxophone and a pitched motor horn giving the work zest and color, while the introduction of popular dance elements points towards the composer's future successes.

Director Marie-Ève Signeyrole paired *Royal Palace* with Puccini's *Il tabarro*, but she tried too hard to link the surrealist world of Weill with Puccini's hyper-realism. The operas indeed share female characters frustrated in love, but only the director's program note made clear that *Royal Palace* was in fact Michele's nightmare in *Il tabarro*. One novel feature of the Berlin premiere

of *Royal Palace* was the use of film to depict aerial shots of the European countryside and cityscape that Dejanira's husband promised her. This generated something of a publicity coup at the time of the premiere; it must have seemed cutting-edge modern(ist) technology for the opera house. Signeyrole offered her own variation by opening *Royal Palace* with a filmed sequence of an air crash, suggesting movie stars on their way to a film festival in the 1950s, who end up floundering around in a lake amid the wreckage of their aircraft. We are a long way from the hotel by the side of an Italian lake specified in the libretto. Despite fine acting, Goll's satirical surrealism was muddled from the outset by the realistic, gory devastation of the plane crash. The playful syllabic dissection of the heroine's name towards the end of Weill's score seemed entirely out of place in the director's watery tragedy. And Dejanira's final drowning was left ambiguous by Signeyrole. Did she jump or was she pushed?

Conductor Rani Calderon led a tight performance, but the orchestra was too loud and frequently covered the voices, including the attractive timbre of soprano Kelebogile Besong as Dejanira, who made the most of her final monologue, which has a touch of turn-of-the-century romantic intensity. Bass Karhaber Shavidze was particularly strong-voiced as Dejanira's husband, and dancer Kwamé Ba brought a touch of period wit to the production, which Signeyrole's work conspicuously lacked.

The director was more at ease with the realism of *Il tabarro*, but her method of linking the two works—a child playing with a toy airplane—was insufficiently strong or informative. As in *Royal Palace*, Signeyrole ignored the libretto's setting and moved the work to a fish-processing plant, where it sounded very odd to sing about the Parisian district of Belleville. Besong did better here than in the Weill but still sounded underpowered in her mid-range; Calderon, who drew a full and exciting sound from the orchestra, was no help. Rudy Park as Luigi, a thrilling if stentorian tenor, provided the only vocal excitement of the evening. Baritone Ilya Silchukov was as musical as Michele as

he had been as Yesterday's Lover in *Royal Palace*, but sounded underpowered in the finale of *Il tabarro*, which saw yet another dramatic misconception when the director introduced into the plot a corpse impaled on a fishhook that had nothing to do with the original libretto. Both Weill and Puccini proved they knew more about drama than Signeyrole.

Stephen Mudge
London



From left: Ilya Silchukov, Karhaber Shavidze, Khatouna Gadelia, and Kelebogile Besong in *Royal Palace*.

A shorter version of this review appeared in the on-line edition of Opera News; the expanded version appears here with the permission of its editors.

Airborne Symphony (Blitzstein)

San Francisco Curious Flights Orchestra

28 May 2016

The stars were aligned in May for Curious Flights, a San Francisco Bay Area concert series whose mission is to uncover and present new and rarely performed works, when they produced the West Coast's first performance of Marc Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*.

Blitzstein's epic work made up the entire second half of the concert, preceded by three smaller gems, all composed in America just before or during World War II: a set of three lyrical songs by Erich Korngold for tenor and piano (drawn from his film scores), Samuel Barber's beautiful and quixotic *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map* for male chorus and timpani solo, and Aaron Copland's tightly-crafted *Sextet* (arranged by the composer from his *Short Symphony*). All three works were beautifully performed and made for a well-rounded first half of this program of distinctively American music.

Blitzstein's work was clearly the *pièce de résistance*. Though he was a dramatist at heart, composing a wealth of stage works, film scores, radio dramas, and incidental music, he also left us a significant collection of pieces for the concert hall. The *Airborne Symphony*, with its tenor and baritone soloists plus a speaking narrator (all texts by the composer), occupies a hard-to-define space somewhere in between. The piece was conceived and mostly composed during Blitzstein's stint in the U.S. Army Air Force in London (1942–44), where he obtained permission from his commanders to write a “big symphony” on the theme of the “sacred struggle of the airborne free men of the world ... to crush the monstrous fascist obstructionist in their path.”

D-Day eliminated any possibility of a wartime premiere, and when Blitzstein returned to the United States he accidentally left the score behind. He was encouraged by his longtime friend and champion, Leonard Bernstein, to reconstruct the entire work for a performance by the New York City Symphony. On 1 April 1946, Bernstein conducted the world premiere, in which Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale participated along with Blitzstein's friend Orson Welles as the “Monitor” (narrator).

The *Airborne* is a suitably massive work; perhaps the term “secular war-time oratorio” would be a more apt genre description. The work is divided into three large movements (each consisting of four parts), described in John Jansson's program notes: “the first describes the triumph of man's achievement of flight, the second the horrors of aerial attack and the mindless violence of Nazi fascism, and the third the daily life of an airman and concluding with the triumph of good over evil.” There is no easy resolution with Blitzstein, though, who has the narrator repeat a warning over the chorus and orchestra's frenzied celebration of victory. The work incorporates Blitzstein's often brash and complex harmonic language, penchant for syncopation, and thick but fascinating orchestration.



Alasdair Neale leads orchestra and chorus during a rehearsal of Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*.

PHOTO: MATTHEW WASHBURN, WASHBURN IMAGERY

The West Coast premiere by Curious Flights in San Francisco serendipitously marked the seventieth anniversary of the world premiere. The performance was well-executed under conductor Alasdair Neale, who exacted striking musical precision from an orchestra of sixty-eight and chorus of twenty-seven superb local musicians. Neale's mastery of the score and instinctive grasp of the inherent drama of the work highlighted Blitzstein's instrumental and vocal effects; he knew exactly when to give the orchestra the leading role and when to support the splendid vocal soloists, Efrain Solís and Brian Thorsett, baritone and tenor respectively. Still more noteworthy was David Latulippe, perfectly cast as the narrator. Latulippe—a professional radio announcer, producer, voiceover artist, and flutist—navigated the challenging text with impeccable clarity and gave a commanding performance, no easy matter when speaking over a full symphonic orchestra.

Curious Flights Founding Artistic Director Brenden Guy and Guest Artistic Director Noah Luna deserve great credit for programming this concert, and so does the regiment of musicians who created a moving performance of an underrated epic. The program was enthusiastically received by its audience at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. My only regret: the ensemble was able to give only a single performance, which is understandable considering the scope of the work. Although some scholars contend that the *Airborne* is a flawed masterpiece or that it was meaningful only to audiences of its time, its power, craft, and unique vision surely cry out for more frequent performances. One hopes that this inspiring performance of Blitzstein's work will inspire more and that it will enter the repertoire of orchestras and choruses everywhere.

David Möschler
San Francisco

David Möschler is the founder of the Awesöme Orchestra Collective. See www.davidmoschler.com.

Kleine Dreigroschenmusik and other works

Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi
Giuseppe Grazioli, conductor

Decca 481 2693

The work of Bertolt Brecht has attracted lively interest in Italian theater over the last sixty years; perhaps Milva's notorious renditions of Weill and Eisler songs have drawn the most international attention to this distinctive performance tradition. This new CD suggests that the Italian manner of handling Weill and Brecht may also be traced in some theatrical compositions from the 1970s and '80s, juxtaposing music from *Die Dreigroschenoper* with Fiorenzo Carpi's *Circus Suite* for small orchestra and Nino Rota's suite for solo piano *Ogni anno punto e da capo* (1971). The former assembles six short pieces written for Dario Fo's ensemble between 1978 and 1984; the latter consists of four movements composed for a production of Eduardo De Filippo's one-act comedy of the same title (first produced in 1931) at the Piccolo Teatro, Milan. *Die Dreigroschenoper* is represented not only by the perennial *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* for wind orchestra, but by four dance-band arrangements authorized by Weill: Hartwig von Platen's *Foxtrott-Potpourri* and *Tango-Potpourri*, each based on a selection of songs from *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1929), and Jerzy Fitelberg's adaptations of the "Zuhälterballade" (under the title "Tango-Ballade") and the "Kanonen-Song" (1928).

Kleine Dreigroschenmusik comes first, and the first thing that strikes the listener is Grazioli's predilection for fast tempos. Thus, the energetic, dance-like qualities of the music are given priority over its more somber moments, while the crystal-clear recorded sound adds to the general impression of brightness. The overture, even faster than the London Sinfonietta's rendition under David Atherton (1976), becomes a kind of minuet. Some movements are presented in a truly exemplary manner, though. "Polly's Lied" is beautifully played, and the thoughtful treatment of the accompaniment parts makes it even better. The crescendo in the Finale comes off impressively.

Because Gianluigi Mattiotti's informative liner notes (only in Italian) identify an appreciation for popular song as the essential link between Weill's theater music and the two suites by Carpi and Rota, the inclusion of von Platen's and Fitelberg's popular arrangements makes sense. While these works deserve attention for demonstrating the assimilation of Weill's stylistic innovations into popular music practice, they add little, if anything, to the appeal and content of the

original compositions, aside from some fancy counter-melodies. This is especially true for von Platen's potpourris, in which stringing together tunes in predictable medleys over a steady beat has a tiring effect (reinforced here by the snare drum, which sounds consistently a little too loud and divorced from the ensemble, probably due to poor mixing). This shortcoming are best counteracted by the exaggerated, ironically exalted performance style adopted by HK Gruber and the Palast Orchester in their 2001 recording. Such Roaring Twenties mannerisms seem to be beyond the Milanese orchestra, with its tendency toward sophistication and smoothness. Nevertheless, it finds nuances unheard in Gruber's recordings by employing a flute (the scores permit variations in instrumentation). Fitelberg, who had studied with Franz Schreker, prepared his arrangements in close contact with the composer, and Weill actually borrowed in *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* the short modulation that Fitelberg introduced in order to skip the interlude between the first and second verse of the "Zuhälterballade." The yoking of the "Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit" and the "Moritat," however, which occurs in both *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* and von Platen's *Blues-Potpourri*, originated with Weill.

Whereas Weill's approach to popular music depends on the artful use of "wrong notes," Fiorenzo Carpi (Giorgio Strehler's "house composer" at the Piccolo Teatro) and Nino Rota go the other way. They achieve a distancing effect mainly through the precise, perhaps overly faithful, reproduction of musical clichés, along the same lines as Shostakovich in some of his lighter works. Carpi's *Circus Suite*, jauntily played and neatly recorded, is great fun to hear, if not exactly an intellectual challenge. Four of its six movements, whose titles refer to circus and variety acts, are burlesque and highly "gestic" marches, but there are also two deliberately clumsy foxtrots. Rota's piano suite, here given its world premiere recording, evokes the *belle époque* by recalling period dance forms: polka, tarantella, waltz, and galop. Fortunately,

the young pianist Stefano Borsatto resists the temptation to shmaltz up Rota's unpretentious pieces with too much romantic sentiment. He resorts to the pedal sparingly, and his interpretation always remains lucid and elegant.

Rota's and Carpi's suites display charm and spirit. But regardless of their enjoyable qualities, their juxtaposition with *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* confirms that when it comes to blending high art with the popular, Weill's music, in his own arrangements, is hard to top.

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