

# Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 36

NUMBER 1

SPRING 2018



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Summer and Fall Performances

Envisioning Weimar: "Babylon Berlin"

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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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## Lied vom blinden Mädchen: Coverage

The discovery of a previously unknown Weill song (see Fall 2017 issue), "Lied vom weißen Käse" or "Lied vom blinden Mädchen" (Song of the Blind Girl), has caused quite a stir. Extensive coverage in print, radio, and on-line media yielded substantial articles in the following publications: *The New York Times* (Joshua Barone), 6 November 2017; *Die Welt* (Manuel Brug), 8 November 2017; *Financial Times* (Rebecca Schmid), 24 November 2017; and *Der Tagesspiegel* (Sören Maahs), 18 December 2017. Austria's *Kleine Zeitung* ran an interview with soprano Ute Gfrerer; a video selection from her recording of the song is featured on the *New York Times* website.

Cover photo: Unit set designed by Dick Bird for *Street Scene* at Teatro Real in Madrid (see pp. 14–15). Photo: Javier del Real



## EDITOR'S NOTE

With Weill turning up in so many different places, there's no way we can consider them all in the *Newsletter*, but in this issue we look in several directions. In addition to our usual news reporting—which includes an account of the twentieth anniversary Lotte Lenya Competition along with a sampling of current engagements of past winners—our feature section looks at a range of Weill manifestations: a very successful week for the ongoing “Music Unwound: Kurt Weill’s America” project in El Paso, recounted by producer Joseph Horowitz along with participating students and faculty; previews of a summerful of upcoming performances, including Blitzstein’s *Regina* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis; and commentary on the riveting new German television

series, “Babylon Berlin.” Our review section features major European performances of *Love Life* and *Street Scene*; our cover photo comes from the latter.

With sadness, we note the passing of three artists integral to the world of Weill and Lenya: Nanette Fabray, star of *Love Life*, is memorialized all too briefly on p. 19; record producer George Avakian, stalwart of the “Weill revival” of the 1950s who worked behind the scenes at Columbia on behalf of Lenya’s series of recordings; and dancer Karin von Arolingen, Lenya’s partner for the first German staging of *Die sieben Todsünden* (Frankfurt, 1960).

Dave Stein

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The *Newsletter* has received the following response to our article “Probably Buried in Some Basement” (Fall 2017), which prompted a reply from author Elmar Juchem:

To the Editor:

We ask that you correct the record with respect to Joseph Weissenberg, specifically the following statement:

“In November 1930, he was tried for medical malpractice, having treated two patients with white cheese to disastrous effect: a diabetic man who died; and an infant girl with an eye infection who went blind. A jury convicted him (but only in the latter case), and he received a six-month prison sentence.”

We state: Although Joseph Weissenberg was charged by the Attorney General with gross negligence in two separate cases, he was found guilty only for his treatment of the infant girl. Yet the girl had already gone blind, having received improper treatment from a medical doctor, as attested in court statements given by the girl’s parents. The initial judgment did not become legally binding; after an appeal hearing on 3 March 1931, the jury found him not guilty. The Attorney General then withdrew his application for revision on 6 July 1931. Thus, Weissenberg was neither convicted, nor did he receive a prison sentence.

Further facts: During the course of the first trial, expert opinion confirmed the harmlessness of white cheese. There was found to be no causal connection between the girl’s blindness and the treatment prescribed by Joseph Weissenberg; the same was true in the case of the diabetic man, who was not even Weissenberg’s patient. At the time the lyrics of the “Lied vom weißen Käse” were written, the results of the proceedings were well known due to extensive media coverage in Berlin and beyond, so untrue and inaccurate references to Joseph Weissenberg were a cheap and easy way to draw attention to this satirical cabaret performance. Joseph Weissenberg dedicated his whole life to helping those who were ill or otherwise in need, and the campaign of denigration and attempts to discredit his work carried out by the propaganda apparatus of the Third Reich should not be perpetuated today.

**Dr. Volker Hildebrandt  
Dr. Andreas Schmetzstorf  
Board of Management  
Johannische Kirche  
Berlin**

To the Editor:

Having overlooked the appeal and the overturning of the verdict, I am grateful for this correction of facts. I believe, however, that the satirical revue performance was not “untrue and inaccurate”: Although a surviving lyric sheet for “Das Lied vom weißen Käse” reads “doch leider ward ich blind” (alas, I became blind), Weill’s setting shows the text changed to “doch leider blieb ich blind” (alas, I remained blind), which suggests that the authors were aware of the outcome of Weissenberg’s appeal.

Weissenberg appears to have been targeted by the Red Revue for another, more obvious, reason. Although primarily known as a faith healer, he was also known to be a strong nationalist, who urged his followers to vote for either the Deutschnationale Volkspartei or the National Socialists. In 1932, he himself boldly announced his intention to vote for Hitler. That same year, Weissenberg’s 77th birthday drew 35,000 to its celebration. The weekly gazette published by Weissenberg’s church, *Der Weiße Berg*, reported on the festivities and called special attention to the fact that representatives of the SS and SA attended and paid tribute. Although Weissenberg helped bring Hitler to power, the Nazis did not return the favor. Early in 1935, Weissenberg’s church was dissolved and later that year a Nazi court convicted him on apparently trumped-up charges of sexually molesting underage girls in his congregation. Weissenberg was imprisoned and died in 1941.

Elmar Juchem

### Lied vom blinden Mädchen: Publications

“Lied vom blinden Mädchen” (Song of the Blind Girl), edited by its discoverer Elmar Juchem, will be published by European American Music, with both the original German lyrics and an English translation by Michael Feingold. A recording by Ute Gfrerer and Shane Schag is in the can and will be available shortly. Check [kwf.org](http://kwf.org) and [eamdc.com](http://eamdc.com) regularly for updates on purchase, distribution, and downloads.

# Kurt Weill, El Paso, and the National Mood

by Joseph Horowitz

*"Wherever I found decency and humanity in the world, it reminded me of America."*

*--Kurt Weill to Max and Mab Anderson, 22 June 1947*

Weill wrote those words after returning from a visit to Europe and Palestine in 1947. I read them aloud at least a dozen times during the Kurt Weill festival in El Paso. Each time I invited my listeners to consider whether or not they still apply.

Because Weill was an exemplary immigrant, he furnishes a singularly timely topic for the NEH-funded "Music Unwound" consortium I am fortunate to direct. "Kurt Weill's America" has so far been produced at DePauw University and the Brevard Festival. It will travel to Chapel Hill and Buffalo. But El Paso—a Mexican-American city on the Mexican border—is where we always knew it would hit closest to home.

The festival lasted seven days (10–16 April) and included five concerts, three master classes, seven classroom presentations, and a visit to a semi-rural high school. Lots of questions are being asked these days about the relevance of orchestras to American communities. Those questions have been silenced in El Paso.

Thanks to Music Unwound, El Paso now hosts the closest collaboration between an orchestra, a university, and the surrounding community anywhere in the US. The orchestra is the El



Paso Symphony and the university is the University of Texas-El Paso, known as UTEP, the purest embodiment of the American Dream I know. The vast majority of the students are local. Most are the first in their families to go to college. All high school graduates who apply are admitted. UTEP anchors El Paso.

The first undergraduate UTEP class I visited was Selfa Chew's "Afro-Mexican History." She is herself Mexican-Chinese-Japanese, an authority on the fate of Japanese-Mexicans during World War II. I told Weill's story: a Jewish cantor's son, born in 1900, he was the foremost German operatic composer of his generation. He fled Hitler and wound up in New York, where he reinvented himself as a leading Broadway composer before dying young in 1950. Weill considered himself an American from day one. He did not wish to consort with other German immigrants. He told *Time Magazine* (25 July 1949): "Americans seem to be ashamed to appreciate things here. I'm not."

The immediacy with which Professor Chew's students engaged with this story was electrifying. One student asked with a trembling voice, "How was Weill able to do it?" She missed Mexico. Another wanted to know if Weill in America ever composed music that alluded to his German past. Not that I know of, I said. The students got me thinking about Weill in new ways.

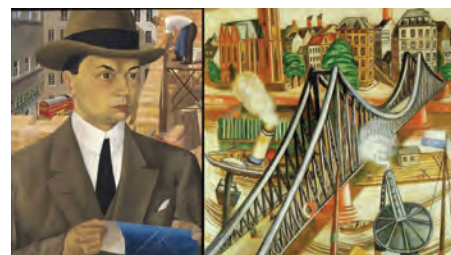


On Friday afternoon a UTEP Music "convocation" featured the El Paso Symphony's exceptional guest soloists—William Sharp and Lisa Vroman—singing Weill. Bill sang "Dirge for Two Veterans," a patriotic setting of Walt Whitman's poem in response to Pearl Harbor. I introduced this performance by screening Franklin Roosevelt's "day of infamy" speech, the declaration of war on Japan. Brian Yothers, of UTEP's English faculty, gave a 10-minute talk on Whitman and why Weill would have found this iconic American a kindred spirit. Two UTEP vocalists sang "How Can You Tell an American?," composed by Weill three years into his American period. The students keenly appreciated the song's answer: you can't tell Americans what to do.

I would call this presentation an exemplary humanities public program in miniature. When our 80 minutes expired, no one got up to leave. I became accustomed to this kind of response in El Paso. The students are the hungriest I know; they have no sense of entitlement to get in the way. The entire week was saturated by a density of discourse and inquiry about the American experience that relentlessly targeted the present moment. Bill and Lisa continued to sing and coach at UTEP throughout the week. Brian addressed three music classes.

The central event was an El Paso Symphony subscription concert, given twice. The first half explored Weill in Europe; the main work was the Weill-Brecht *Seven Deadly Sins* (1933) with Lisa playing both Anna I and Anna II. Part two delivered Weill in America: all four Whitman songs sung by Bill as a potent cycle; a Broadway medley to close. This is music as sanguine as Weill/Brecht is cheeky.

What was Weill about? The script and visuals we prepared for the concert posed this question, allowing us to contextualize the Whitman songs as an immigrant's charged response to the bombing of the American fleet. And we situated the *sui generis* *Seven Deadly Sins*—a work that can easily confound—within the barbed esthetics and politics of Weimar culture, exemplified by the assaultive paintings of Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.





The next event was “I’m a Stranger Here Myself,” a joint presentation of UTEP’s Opera and Theatre programs. Cherry Duke, director of Opera UTEP, wrote in a program note: “With the prevalence of division, xenophobia, and fear in today’s news, I was struck by similar themes in many of Weill’s works. He seems to ask the question: Who exactly is the stranger, the outsider, the exile?” Weill’s songs, and a chunk of his 1946 Broadway opera *Street Scene*, were interspersed with excerpts from Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and from the 1929 Elmer Rice play upon which Weill’s *Street Scene* was based. These juxtapositions hit hard. Even more powerful was a recitation of “Let America be America Again” (1935) by Langston Hughes, who collaborated with Weill on *Street Scene*. It reads in part:

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be. ...  
(America never was America to me.) ...  
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

The show began hypnotically, with a student clarinetist, Aaron Gomez, performing his own solo version of “Speak Low,” a rendition that eloquently discovered Jewish/Yiddish roots.

I will never forget the testimony of a Jewish El Paso resident who remembered her childhood in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where her father sold automobiles and supported the local NAACP. Her family had to house Harry Belafonte because no hotel would take him. Black workers were resented as outsiders. Anti-Semitism was virulent. Her father’s favorite recordings included Weill’s anti-apartheid *Lost in the Stars*. He himself used to sing “September Song.” Only now, she told us, did she understand why.

I had my own “September Song” epiphany during my week in El Paso. It was and is one of Kurt Weill’s two most popular Broadway songs, the other being “Speak Low.” We heard Bill Sharp sing it—unforgettably—with the El Paso Symphony. The Hudson Shad, a one-of-a-kind male quartet long associated with Weill, offered a doo-wop *a cappella* version of “Speak Low.” When a student named Jose, in

Selfa Chew’s class, brought home to me the riddle that Weill in his American music never looked back, I recalled a conversation with Lotte Lenya when I had the opportunity to interview her for the *New York Times*. She speculated that for Weill, “never look back” was not only a strategy of renewal but a way of suppressing intrusive memories, both good and bad. It cannot be a coincidence that both “September Song” and “Speak Low” course with a commanding nostalgia.

The quarterback for the El Paso festival was Frank Candelaria, who as Associate Provost at UTEP has the vision and persistence to make big things happen. (Next fall, he becomes Dean of the Arts at SUNY Purchase.)

Frank is an El Paso native, the first member of his family to obtain what is called “higher education”—Oberlin and Yale. He left a tenured position at UT-Austin to return to El Paso five years ago. He expected the Weill festival to catch fire in El Paso, but the intimacy with which it penetrated personal lives took him by surprise. On the final day he said to me: “I learned a lot about my own city and how strongly people identify as Americans.”

Which brings me to my final vignette. A visit to Eastlake High School proved a humbling experience. It serves a semi-rural “colonia.” Of the school’s 2,200 predominantly Hispanic students, 69 per cent are “economically disadvantaged.” Frank and I had visited Eastlake last year with a program built around Copland and Mexico.

Again some 300 students were taken out of their classes for an hour-long assembly. When I entered the auditorium I was applauded—they remembered me. I spoke about Kurt Weill and immigration, I shared my clip of FDR declaring war and played a recording of “Dirge for Two Veterans.” A girl raised her hand to tell us that she had wept twice during the song, at the two separate places where Whitman and Weill describe moonlight shining on the twin graves of the two Civil War soldiers, a father and son. Then I played a Frank Sinatra recording of “September Song,” after which the students requested another one. So I played Sinatra singing “Speak Low.”

Afterwards, the Eastlake Chorus asked to sing for me. They chose “The Star-Spangled Banner.”



The original version of this essay is posted at <http://www.artsjournal.com/uq/2018/04/the-future-of-orchestras-part-five-kurt-weill-el-paso-and-the-national-mood.html>. Published with the author’s permission. The images on pp. 4–5 come from the visual accompaniment to the El Paso Symphony concert prepared by Peter Bogdanoff. On the next page, some participants share their thoughts and impressions.



UTEP opera students perform the "Ice Cream Sextet" from *Street Scene*. From left: Octavio Garavito, Aylin Franco, Mauricio Perusquia, guest artist Brian Downen, Jacqueline Hale, Alejandro Carrillo Pastrana and Emilie Merritt

"I found a real hunger for Kurt Weill here in El Paso. Its intensity (even among high school students) surprised me. I was very moved by audience reactions.

"It is clear that Weill touches people in a very personal, even transformative way. A woman in the audience shared with me that following the death of her husband a few years ago, she just shut down. But after hearing Bill Sharp sing 'September Song' at our Saturday night concert she was moved to open up to new possibilities in her life. She was on the verge of tears. It was a unique experience for me—I'll never forget it."

**Frank Candelaria, Associate Provost**

**"It was a beautiful week, and believe me the inspiration went both ways. Working with the lovely UTEP students was certainly the highlight for me."**

**Lisa Vroman**

"A few of my students gave class presentations on how they were affected by the EPSO concert, their time with Lisa and Bill, and by their own growth through working on Weill's music. They have become big fans of Kurt Weill, and last semester they hadn't even heard of him! This project was certainly a 'high-impact' experience!"

**Professor Cherry Duke**

## The Students Speak

"These projects on Kurt Weill gave me a new perspective on my citizenship: I need to be doing way more for my country and its music. I have no excuse, because Weill, an immigrant, devoted his life to it, and what he left is breathtakingly beautiful."

**Toni Torres**

"Kurt Weill was truly about his audience and touching as many people as he could through music. He pushed boundaries both through musical composition and subject matter and made it accessible and enjoyable for all audiences. That is something I will never forget after the experience, and honor, of performing some of his music."

**Elizabeth Gandarilla**

"Studying the music of Kurt Weill was a very special experience, one I will always cherish. His work has such great depth musically but also in terms of social implications and in the way he depicts complex human emotion. It was truly amazing to see that the same subjects he wrote about long ago are still very relevant in our society.

"It was very fulfilling to be part of the overall message his music conveys and to help create awareness of the important issues brought out in his work. His music is packed with deeper meanings beyond what lies on the surface and demands personal reflection and motivation to be a better person. Weill inspires us to seek the greater good, to help others, to keep moving forward with hope without looking back on bad times—because that was how he lived."

**Christine Ponce-Diaz**



POSTER DESIGN: ALEANDRA NUÑEZ VARGAS



# Behind the Scenes

## Summer and Fall Performances

### Regina

#### Opera Theatre of St. Louis

James Robinson, director; Stephen Lord, conductor  
Principal cast: Susan Graham (Regina Giddens), James Morris (Ben Hubbard), Ron Raines (Oscar Hubbard), Susanna Phillips (Birdie), Melody Wilson (Addie)

Performance Dates: 26, 31 May, 6, 8, 16, 20, 24 June

#### James Robinson:

I consider *Regina* the great American opera but curiously it remains under-performed. It does make certain demands: a deep cast of first-rate singing actors who are comfortable with complex music as well as tricky dialogue; and an approach that acknowledges its roots on Broadway as well as its operatic character. While the source material for *Regina*, Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, may have lost a bit of its sting over the years, it still resonates in today's world, shining a light on greed, racism, and exploitation. These subjects meant a great deal to Marc Blitzstein, and his endlessly inventive music creates a structure which he filled with searing dramatic situations and vivid characters. The saga of the Giddenses and the Hubbards is for me like a genteel, Southern "House of Atreus." As my design team and I prepared the production, we decided to strip this 1900 world of Regina and her avaricious brothers to its bones, instead of hiding behind the usual

flocked wallpaper and velvet that one associates with this classic American story.

*Idiomatic American musical style and drama sharp as a knife are what draw me time and again to this piece.*

-Stephen Lord

#### Susan Graham:

[Regina]'s so bad! I'm always playing the boy next door and don't usually get to do juicy parts like this ... It's a fascinating piece, and certainly not something I'd ever envisioned myself doing. It wasn't exactly on my wish list, so I'm grateful for the way things have turned out ....

I feel *Regina* will open new horizons for me. I've never sung any Blitzstein songs, but I'm sure that after this adventure in Regina-land I will want to explore them further.

[quoted in *Opera* magazine, April 2018]



PHOTO: B. EALOVEGA

#### Stephen Lord:

I have been in the thrall of *Regina* since my teens. I was working at Houston Grand Opera when it was revived in 1980, and I programmed it at Boston Lyric Opera soon after I became music director. And now in my new capacity as Music Director Emeritus in St. Louis I was thrilled when my colleagues received my proposal to produce it here with enthusiasm.

For me, this is the direction "American Opera" needed to take. Real, legitimate, trained singing combined with idiomatic American musical style and drama sharp as a knife are what draw me time and again to this piece. It must be carefully cast with well-rounded singing actors and a keen stage director to have maximum effect. And we have assembled a dream cast.

#### "Broadway Opera/Opera on Broadway"

As *Street Scene* settles into the international repertory, and OTSL offers a new production of *Regina*, opera administrators, composers, performers, and experts from around the world will gather in St. Louis for the annual Opera America Conference. On the agenda is a panel entitled "Broadway Opera/Opera on Broadway," which explores the challenges and rewards of performing such "hybrid" works, with particular emphasis on the socially critical, musically diverse, and dramatically potent Broadway operas of Weill, Blitzstein, and Bernstein. The session will focus on the potential of such works to create new opportunities for community engagement and inclusion, and to attract new audiences.

Three distinguished panelists, representing diverse backgrounds and wide-ranging experience, lead the discussion. Patricia Racette, straight off her portrayal of Anna Maurrent at Teatro Real (see pp. 14–15), draws on this experience, along with recent role debuts as Magda Sorrel (Menotti's *The Consul*) and The Old Lady in Bernstein's *Candide*. Conductor John Mauceri has worked, and fought, hard to program these works in opera houses around the world. Director Tazewell Thompson's experience with *Porgy and Bess* and *Lost in the Stars* lends him unique insight into the dramatic power of works which address racial inequality. Kim Kowalke will introduce the topic and moderate the discussion.

The conference takes place 20–23 June at the Hyatt Regency St. Louis at the Arch; this session will be held on Thursday, 21 June, at 3:30.

### Street Scene

#### Virginia Opera

Dorothy Danner, director; Adam Turner, conductor

Principal cast: Jill Gardner (Anna Maurant), Zachary James (Frank Maurant), Maureen McKay (Rose), David Blalock (Sam Kaplan)

Performance Dates: 28, 30 September, 2 October in Norfolk

6–7 October in Fairfax

12, 14 October in Richmond



PHOTO: CHELSEA FAUSEL

#### Zachary James:

It's absolutely thrilling to bring Frank Maurant to life with an extraordinary cast and team. Frank has been a dream role of mine since I first sang "Let Things Be Like They Always Was" in college, and this opportunity is especially dear, as it is my first professional Weill role, almost ten years after winning a prize at the Lotte Lenya Competition. Frank is a complex man and I'm proceeding cautiously with the excavation of his inner life, so the audience will feel the suffering and humanity of this dark character with me. It's a delicious role with dramatic vocal writing over dense orchestration, so you can text-paint and add emotion and grit while letting loose the voice in a way that has to approach Wagnerian singing.

#### Adam Turner:

A vivid snapshot of the American dream with all its melting-pot social issues, Kurt Weill's "American Opera" tackles serious and timely themes of bigotry and xenophobia. With its large and diverse casting requirements, *Street Scene* presents tremendous challenges along with extraordinary opportunities for community partnerships, as we seek to expand our civic impact.

As conductor, I feel incredibly fortunate to be exploring the blurred lines of this "Broadway opera." It's an exceptionally fulfilling and demanding score, with nearly every musical style represented, from Puccini-esque verismo to show tunes. One of the greatest challenges will lie in approaching dialogue and underscoring. I learned the fine art of shaping this specific type of musical/opera hybrid as the inaugural Kurt Weill/Julius Rudel Conducting Fellow in 2016, when I assisted John DeMain on Washington National Opera's production of *Lost in the Stars*. Following Virginia Opera's critically acclaimed production of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, I'm excited about offering our audiences another Weill masterpiece!

*It's an exceptionally fulfilling and demanding score.*

-Adam Turner

### Lost in the Stars

#### Union Avenue Opera, St. Louis

Shaun Patrick Tubbs director; Scott Schoonover, conductor

Principal cast: Kenneth Overton (Stephen Kumalo), Krysty Swann (Irina), Roderick George (Leader), Melody Wilson (Linda)

Performance Dates: 17–18, 24–25 August

#### Scott Schoonover:

In cities where the struggle against racial injustice is painfully real, theater artists must make our work mirror our surroundings and challenge audiences to see themselves in the characters and situations onstage. *Lost in the Stars*, with its searing portrayal of South African apartheid, forces contemporary audiences to connect with these issues and realize in a visceral way that we face many of the same challenges. Such a powerful theatrical work provokes reflection and dialogue, and may even change minds. While its heartbreaking conclusion is difficult to bear, the last moments of *Lost in the Stars* offer hope for reconciliation and understanding.

#### Shaun Patrick Tubbs:

I credit a great deal of my understanding and appreciation of Weill's work to serving as the SDCF Kurt Weill Fellow for a production of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* directed by John Fulljames, at The Royal Opera House Covent Garden in London, 2015.

*Lost in the Stars* asks us to confront, and identify, our culpability in the most painful moments in our lives, when hatred and spite seem so invincible while love and forgiveness seem impossible. At its core, it is a story of two fathers and what they learn about themselves through the choices of their sons. I hope to illuminate these themes in the simplest and clearest way possible. Much of this opera is literally and figuratively black and white, but we will examine those parts of the story that remain in the gray. That will make *Lost in the Stars* compelling and relevant.



PHOTO: MIKE QUINN



## Lenya Story: Ein Liebeslied

### Renaissance-Theater, Berlin

Torsten Fischer, director

Principal cast: Sona MacDonald (Lenya), Tonio Arango (Weill, et al.)

Opening night: 18 October 2018

career truly took flight alongside the symbiosis of Brecht and Weill. In *Threepenny Opera* she was the first and, I say, the one and only Jenny. I portray her lust for life—her hunger to leave her poor household and constantly drunken father. We explore Weill and Lenya's relationship and friendship. And we commemorate one of her greatest accomplishments: After his death she gave her all to keep his work protected, and she was a force of nature in that role as much as any other.

### Sona MacDonald:

*Lenya Story*, which premiered last spring in Lenya's birthplace, Vienna, had a successful run and next will open in the Renaissance-Theater Berlin on her birthday, 18 October, with my co-star from Vienna, Tonio Arango. The show takes a lot out of me, but boy, do I love it! I'm grateful to carry her legendary torch.

What a lucky lady I am to honor Lenya in Berlin, where her

*I'm grateful  
to carry her  
legendary torch.*

-Sona MacDonald

## Mahagonny Songspiel Pierrot lunaire (Schoenberg) Die sieben Todsünden

### Opéra national du Rhin

David Pountney, director; Roland Kluttig, conductor

Principal cast: Lauren Michelle and Lenneke Ruiten (alternating as Anna I)

Performance dates: 20, 22, 24, 26, 28 May 2018 in Strasbourg  
5 June in Colmar  
13, 15 June in Mulhouse

### Lauren Michelle:

I enjoy creating the illusion of a character within the world created by any given production. This production in particular is very meaningful. David Pountney has done a lot for my career, though this is our first collaboration. His vision has come through effectively to the cast, as he has used references from premieres and historical performances of these pieces. Intertwining these three worlds makes for interesting challenges, and in many ways each role enhances the other. In all three works, the text is essential, so I'm concentrating on the meaning of the text and on my German diction. As I learn to color *Sprechstimme* in *Pierrot lunaire*, it influences and refreshes my delivery of the text in *Die sieben Todsünden*.

## Der Silbersee

### Theater Pforzheim

Thomas Münstermann, director; Florian Erdl, conductor

Principal cast: Philipp Werner (Severin), Tomas Möwes (Olim), Franziska Tiedtke (Fennimore), Lilian Huynen (Frau von Luben)

Performance dates: 5, 12, 23 May, 6, 19, 21, 29 June, 5 July 2018

### Pforzheimer Zeitung:

Unemployment, hunger, lives in peril—the late Weimar Republic in the midst of a worldwide depression had no way out. Kurt Weill and Georg Kaiser started here with their “operatic play” *Der Silbersee*, giving it a strong component of social criticism. Pforzheim's Intendant, Thomas Münstermann, has staged the three-act play with plenty of allusions to the present day. More than thirty locals, many from the “Kultur Schaffer” club, are onstage with the chorus and children's chorus from the theater; in addition, twenty guest performers play the role of “society” in their blue overalls, carrying signs as they move through the town.

Münstermann's direction draws sharp distinctions between wealth and poverty, guilt and atonement, desperation and optimism. The powerful composition of images makes the greatest impression, and the chorus of locals has a big share in that as they hold their long poles. ... The floor of the stage is covered with squares bearing letters and numbers; for the most part it is empty, but sometimes it becomes a forest or castle, the necessary visual images created by the performers in their blue uniforms.



Olim (Tomas Möwes) surrounded by the chorus of locals with long poles

PHOTO: SABINE HAYMANN

# Envisioning Weimar: “Babylon Berlin”

The new German television series “Babylon Berlin” has garnered a fistful of awards—including best German drama series—and extensive comment after only sixteen episodes. (Sixteen more have been ordered.) Set in 1929, the main story encompasses a nest of plots and intrigues, including a pornography ring and Russian armaments flowing to right-wing German militias. The creators, Tom Tykwer, Henk Handloegten, and Achim von Borries, have made sure that the adventurous side of Weimar culture is amply represented, including *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which had swept Berlin the previous year. One episode is set partly during a performance, in fact, and melodies from the work turn up occasionally in the soundtrack or as part of the narrative. We offer perspectives on the newest smash hit from Germany from scholar Stephen Hinton, editor of the critical editions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End* (forthcoming), and from the lead orchestrator for the series, Gene Pritsker. Broadcast on Sky TV in Germany, the show is available for streaming in the U.S. on Netflix.

“Babylon Berlin,” the lavishly produced German television series that received its gala premiere at Berlin’s Theater am Schiffbauerdamm last September, showcases the cultural capital of the Weimar Republic in the fullness of its Babylonian aspects. Wonder rubs shoulders with confusion, splendor with squalor. Particularly emblematic are the nightclub scenes: all glitz and glamor on stage, while a real-life “Pimp’s Ballad” plays itself out in the backstage green rooms. Music performs a central role throughout by evoking a mythical 1920s sonic landscape. Much of this is integral to the plot. The viewer is treated to several popular songs from the time, including “Mack the Knife,” as well as new numbers created to sound more or less historically authentic.

The key events take place during the spring of 1929, months before the stock market crash in late October that would trigger social and political upheaval and pave the way for the seizure of power by the National Socialists. The oft-used metaphor “dancing on a volcano” captures that precarious moment in the Republic’s history. “Babylon Berlin” presents the cultural choreography of that “dancing” and its complex psychosocial underpinnings without offering any particular explanation, still less a theory, for the eruption that brought it all to a disastrous and violent end.

This portrait of the Republic prior to Black Friday, at once intoxicating and sobering, draws freely on the novels of Volker Kutscher, a German writer born in 1962, who has created a kind of historically informed detective fiction—Alfred Döblin meets Raymond Chandler, as it were. “For me,” Kutscher has stated in an interview published in the British *Radio Times*, “it is a big question—how this could have happened in Germany? It was a civilized country in the 1920s.... To understand how it all went wrong is a big question and the answer is not simple. So maybe by writing and reading novels you can get closer to the answer.” The same goes for watching “Babylon Berlin.”

Taking its approach and much of its material from the first of Kutscher’s nine novels, *Der nasse Fisch* (German police slang

for “cold case”), the series doesn’t narrate history so much as shed light on the multiple forces that were at work. Indeed, so numerous and complexly intertwined are the diverse plot threads from which the sixteen action-packed episodes are woven that it would be impossible to disentangle and identify them all here, even in the most perfunctory summary.

Front and center throughout the series, however, are the professional and personal life stories of the three principal characters, who also function as allegories. Inspector Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch) pursues sensational criminal corruption at the highest levels, all the while nursing a drug habit that goes back to the First World War, when his experience in the field left him not only with PTSD but also with survivor guilt. His part-time assistant and part-time love interest Charlotte Ritter (Liv Lisa Fries) earns money on the side in those backstage green rooms in order to support her dirt-poor family in their working-class tenement apartment. Rath’s colleague, Detective Chief Inspector Bruno Wolter, brilliantly played by Peter Kurth, is at once affable and ruthless in his crooked ways. He has become embroiled in the formation of a shadow Reichswehr, a band of disillusioned military officers who attempt a *coup d’état* with the goal of restoring Kaiser Wilhelm II to the German throne.

At this point, in episode 14, *Die Dreigroschenoper* comes prominently into play as the backdrop for an assassination attempt on the Republic’s iconic Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, planned during a gala performance at the aforementioned Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. Already in the previous episode we hear Wolter whistling the tune of “Die Moritat von Mackie Messer”—a bit of ironic leitmotif deployment. Ironic, too, is the scene in which a street musician grinds out that same tune as police break up a Communist Party gathering, and Fritz (the anti-establishment boyfriend of Charlotte’s friend Greta) is shot in the back. All of this acts as a prelude to the theater performance itself, whose epoch-defining production was still going strong nine months after its legendary opening night on 31 August 1928. As Macheath’s gangsters wield their weapons onstage, Wolter takes aim with his, only to be thwarted by his “frenemy” Rath.

Co-written and directed by Tom Tykwer (whose films include *Run Lola Run*) “Babylon Berlin” has attracted a fair amount of controversy—perhaps inevitably and certainly intentionally—because of how it treats topics from Germany’s past and, if only implicitly, draws connections to the present. As one of the most expensive non-English-language TV series ever made, it is also vastly entertaining.

Stephen Hinton



Tom Tykwer directs a scene from “Babylon Berlin”

PHOTO: FRÉDÉRIC BATTIERA/FILME





I work with Tom Tykwer on all his films and TV series. For “Babylon Berlin,” the composers are Johnny Klimek and Tykwer himself. My usual role with them is lead orchestrator. I take their music to the next level, adding harmonies and melodic elaboration. For “Babylon Berlin,” the main thing I did is take their melodies and arrange them in an early jazz, 1920s style, so it sounds like a Berlin cabaret.

When it came to orchestrating “Babylon Berlin,” we were intentionally going for that Kurt Weill sound. Maybe we didn’t say the name “Kurt Weill” but we knew where we were coming from and why we wanted this particular instrumentation, built around woodwinds, trumpet and trombone, violin and cello, with banjo, so it gives you high and low voices and represents every part of the orchestra. I’m a guitarist, but I found the ban-

jo tricky. I had to learn how to use it. I mean, you can just write chords, but I was really interested in getting the sound right.

In a way, Kurt Weill is *responsible* for the sound of this series. I consider him an exemplary composer. He combined American jazz and European vocabulary and made his own very particular voice that people have copied ever since. I went to Kurt Weill school when I re-orchestrated *Johnny Johnson* for symphony orchestra (first performed 2015). I knew *Three-penny Opera*, too, and I love a lot of his songs that have become jazz standards; some of them are just perfect. I studied his scores and really got into it—then when “Babylon Berlin” came around, I was ready; Kurt Weill had already given me a good grounding in the music of that era. I used a lot of what I learned from *Johnny Johnson* by studying his original arrangements when I started doing “Babylon Berlin.” I thought, “Oh yeah, I know this music well,” because I had already gotten into the nitty-gritty of what he was doing.

Gene Pritsker

## 100 Years Ago—

Weill moved to Berlin in April 1918 and matriculated at the Hochschule für Musik. Fresh from Dessau, in the provinces, he took quickly to the city and continued his rapid musical and intellectual development. Letters to his family provide vivid accounts of his growth and experiences in an unfamiliar but stimulating place. In mid-November, he witnessed a revolution, but even that could not distract him very long from music. To commemorate the hundredth anniversary of his arrival in Berlin, we offer a few selections from the correspondence, published by Metzler in 2000 as *Kurt Weill: Briefe an die Familie (1914–1950)*.

### 23 April 1918

I’ve been in Berlin since yesterday afternoon and up to now I’m feeling just fine, knock on wood. The question of my living quarters has been settled and I like them in every respect. ... Yesterday I went to the Hochschule immediately and discovered that I am the only one assigned to have lessons in composition with [Engelbert] Humperdinck. All the others are to study with Koch. That was just a piece of good luck for me, although in some respects Koch is better.

### 26? April 1918

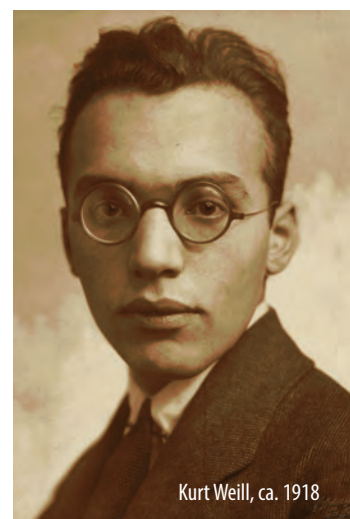
The Hochschule is great. I have lessons with the famous cathedral organist Walter Fischer. Yesterday I had piano and score-reading lessons. In piano I’m continuing with Czerny, scales, etc., and working on a Beethoven sonata. ... Tomorrow is my first meeting with Humperdinck. The situation is like this: The younger driving force here is Friedrich Koch, who therefore has the most students. Humperdinck must want one, too, and they probably chose me because I was the furthest ahead in piano playing and my compositions go in the most modern directions.

### 2 May 1918

I’ve met some rather nice fellow students who are ahead of me in improvisation, counterpoint, etc., but in other things like piano, score-reading, organ, conducting, and theory they can’t touch me. For the most part they come here from famous teachers like Paul Ertl, Leopold Schmidt, etc. That really spurs me on. Yesterday I signed a contract with Davidsohn, according to which I’m the conductor of the Religious Congregation of Friedenau for the High Holidays, for 250 Marks. I’ll have a mixed chorus or a women’s chorus—haven’t thought the matter over at all, just simply signed. There’s no way they’ll engage me as the choral conductor for the larger congregation, but probably assistant organist.

### 9 May 1918

Yesterday [Humperdinck] came to the Hochschule, gave me new homework, and told me at the next lesson I would show him the sketch of my string quartet [in B Minor]. I immediately dug it up and now I’m working on it. ... It’s purely an accident that I’ve gotten in with Humperdinck. They got me mixed up with someone who had inquired if it would be possible to arrange lessons with him. I’m quite satisfied with the entire situation.



Kurt Weill, ca. 1918



The opening of the String Quartet in B Minor in Weill's manuscript

I've already heard two magnificent lectures at the university. In [Max] Dessau's "Philosophy and Art," every single word is a revelation for me, and [Ernst] Cassirer's discussions of the philosophy of the Greeks I follow with great pleasure and interest. It's a wonderful thing to be able to follow the completely unique range of ideas of these illustrious intellects. It opens one up to entirely new worlds of thought, to new concepts and new stimulations.

#### 15 May 1918

I saw the world premieres of two operas, *Notre Dame* by Franz Schmidt (in the Royal Opera House) and *Die Hügelmühle* by our own Friedrich Koch (in the Deutsche Opernhaus). Neither one amounts to an important enrichment of German opera, although the first one especially has some lovely melodic passages. Under no circumstances can musical theater continue in this direction, with such alternations between deafening noise and brooding, frequently boring tone combinations (it's impossible to talk about melody as far as Koch is concerned).

#### early June 1918

We don't have many pretty parks here, but the Grunewald is only twenty minutes away. ... One Friday evening I went to the Fasanenstrasse [synagogue], but since then I've gone to the theater every single night. I'd really like to experience something different on a Friday evening, namely an uplifting/edifying divine service. I won't go back there, but this evening I'll try Pestalozzistrasse (no organ).

#### mid-June 1918

On 27 June I'll be accompanying this year's last public performance at the opera school of Stern's Conservatory. ... I'm really profiting from this work: 1.) learning to coach; 2.) sight-reading the wildest things (we just did Act II of *Die Walküre* on two pianos, including the Ride of the Valkyries); and 3.) getting acquainted with lots of operas and *Lieder*.

#### 19 July 1918

When I look back over my first semester, I'm convinced that this quarter of a year has paid for itself already. I've written my first larger work [String Quartet in B Minor], in an entirely satisfying way at that; I've gained real insight into what it means to be a composer; and I've profited greatly from lessons in score-reading, organ, and piano. ... What I've learned about life in general is invaluable, such as how to handle an oatmeal boiler as well as how to handle impertinent female choristers. Therefore I am quite certain that not many students have left for vacation after their first semester with as much justified satisfaction as I.

#### 9 August 1918

As easy as it was to work in Berlin, the more difficult it is for me here [Dessau] in these dreary surroundings. Well, this goes to show you how much I depend on stimulus from teachers, fellow students, and concert- and operagoing. Will I ever be able to find the art of true creative power, when up to now I've been unable to strip off this dependency? ... Little by little, the power of concentration and the joy of working seem to be returning, and I hope to be able to finish once I'm back in Berlin.

#### 8 November 1918

Although it can hardly be taken for granted that this letter will get to you, I don't want to leave it unwritten. Well, through the unbelievable stupidity of these "melechs" [i.e., royalists, or supporters of the Kaiser], we've finally come to a point where every single minute we must reckon with the outbreak of an uprising. ... After the tumultuous jubilation over the impending armistice, on the very same evening there arose enormous tension and nervousness, caused by the events in the northern cities and the precautionary measures of the police, which are widening by the minute, especially after the ultimatum to the Kaiser. Up to now, order has been kept by brute force, so that one must fear that, should it be taken away, we will have one of the largest revolutions in history on our hands.

#### 12 November 1918

Saturday's great revolution broke out with such elemental force and velocity that out there in the country you probably won't be able to understand it all. ... Saturday I stayed close to the Reichstag all day, saw the surprise attack on the military barracks, the formation of the A- und S. [laborers and soldiers'] Councils, Liebknecht, Hoffmann, Ledebour, and others, and finally in the evening the heavy fighting at the Marstall. I was also present at the pitched battle at the Reichstag. ... The university is still closed and I'd like to make myself available to the councils.

#### 15 November 1918

Sometimes I still can't believe that all the arms have been laid down, that everything has turned out quite differently, that I need no longer fear this ominous thing called the draft, and that there no longer exists the possibility that I might become a Royal Generalmusikdirektor. The revolution, here, too, has now been steered toward calmer waters, and several excellent, completely trustworthy men have taken the reins. All would be well if one did not have to worry about one thing: that instead of having a dictatorship of the aristocracy, we will have a dictatorship of the proletariat. Admittedly, only the Spartacists set that as a goal, but here in Berlin, the parties of the middle have allowed themselves to become so bereft of influence that it will be very difficult to repair the damage. If they don't insist on a convocation of the National Assembly and on the center's participation in government, we can expect Russian conditions and programs [*sic*], which, as an effective means of attracting the masses will be recommended warmly in pamphlets carrying the endorsements of both independents and ultra-conservatives. ...

Monday *Missa solennis* under [Siegfried] Ochs, Tuesday [Bronislaw] Huberman with Strauss conducting, Wednesday Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem* at Unter den Linden under [Hugo] Rüdell.