Raves for
Lady in the Dark
at New York City Center

New Lives for
Deadly Sins

Unveiling a New
Orchestration
Published twice a year, the Kurt Weill Newsletter features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 4,300 copies, the Newsletter is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for consideration.

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.

EDITOR’S NOTE
As so often, this spring finds us looking both backward and forward to striking developments in the Weill universe. Behind us lies the MasterVoices production of Lady in the Dark, which proved to be everything Weill fans had been hoping for, greeted by a rapturous press and glowing ovations at each performance. Meanwhile, a new epoch in the history of one of Weill’s best-known works, Die sieben Todsünden, begins on 21 September at BeethovenFest Bonn, the world premiere of a new version for an orchestra of fifteen musicians. We talked to the two composers responsible for the new version, HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel, and to two members of Ensemble Modern, which will execute the new score. The new version is intended to encourage fully staged performances, and we review the record of productions.

Vive les Livres!
Two noteworthy books have appeared in France: A popular biography of Weill, the first in French since 2000, by composer Bruno Giner; and a gloriously illustrated account of the life and work of the comtesse de Noailles, patrons of the arts and indispensable part of the Parisian scene for decades. The pair played a decisive role in helping Weill establish himself in France, and the book includes several references to Weill and a brief chapter on his connections with the Noailles.


Down in the Valley Re-issue
Weill’s American opera for students, Down in the Valley (libretto by Arnold Sundgaard), had profound impact in the late 1940s and 1950s, with thousands of performances all over the United States. It was the first work featured on NBC’s Opera Theatre early in 1950; less than two weeks after CBS broadcast Carmen, as the two networks introduced staged opera on U.S. television. That broadcast resulted in a cast recording featuring Marion Bell (as Jennie Parsons) and others on RCA. But there was a competing recording made around the same time on Decca and starring Alfred Drake as Brack Weaver; it was the only Weill work Drake ever recorded. While the RCA version has been released on CD, the Decca version has not, until now. British label Stage Door Records has issued a new disc pairing Drake’s performances in Decca’s version with the orchestra of the London Symphony Orchestra. Meanwhile, a new epoch in the history of one of Weill’s most popular and influential works is back on the market.

German Publisher for Love Life
Músik und Bühne has agreed to represent Weill and Alan Jay Lerner’s Love Life in German-speaking territories. The agency will henceforth handle all licensing requests in Germany, Austria, and part of Switzerland. The premiere in Freiburg on 9 December 2017 with book and lyrics translated by Rüdiger Bering marked the first fully staged performance of the original concept musical in Germany, or indeed anywhere on the Continent. Musik und Bühne’s representation—the firm already handles several of Weill’s Broadway musicals in German-speaking territories—will simplify the process of arranging future performances. To license a production elsewhere, please contact the Foundation.

Love Life Announced for City Center Encores!
Dates: 18–22 March 2020 (7 performances)
Director: Victoria Clark
Music Director: Rob Berman
Premiere of Critical Edition of score and script prepared by Joel Galdan

This summer’s highly anticipated new production of Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, directed by Ivo van Hove, takes the stage at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence for four performances in July. Eva-Pekka Salonen leads London’s Philharmonia Orchestra and a cast of Weill performers: Karita Mattila as Leokadja Beggich, Annette Dasch as Jenny, Nikolai Schukoff as Jim, Alan Oke as Fatty, Sir Willard White as Trinity Moses, and Sean Panikkar as Jack O’Byrnes. The production moves to Dutch National Opera in March 2020, where 2015 Lotte Lenya Competition winner Lauren Michelle will make her role debut as Jenny. Markus Stenz will take over as conductor, while Schukoff, Oke, and White reprise their roles, joined by Doris Soffel as Beghich. Additional co-producers include Opera Vlaanderen, Grand Théâtre de la Ville de Luxembourg, and the Metropolitan Opera.

Salonen has plenty more Weill on his plate for the coming year. He’ll lead in London to lead the Philharmonia in “Weimar Berlin: Bittersweet Metropolis” series running 9–13 June and 23–29 September. Kleine Dreigroschenmusik gets an airing on the first night; Dagmar Manzel performs songs by Weill and his Berlin contemporaries 23 September; and in the final concert, Salonen leads Christian Tetzlaff and the Philharmonia wind section in Weill’s Violin Concerto. Salonen will mount the podium at his other orchestral home, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, to present still more Weill: the Violin Concerto with soloist Carolin Widmann, 7–9 February; and “The Seven Deadly Sins,” 13–16 February, at Walt Disney Concert Hall.
**Raves for Lady**

In a run of three performances at New York City Center, MasterVoices presented a supercharged semi-staged adaptation of Weill's Lady in the Dark to enthusiastic audiences. Led by conductor and director Ted Sperling and starring Tony Award winner Victoria Clark as Liza Elliott, the production inspired a tsunami of acclaim from the press. (See our review on p. 12.)

**“Hearing Weill’s original orchestration is a major draw...”**

- Seth ColterWall, New York Daily News, 26 April 2019

**“The musical sequences are truly fabulous in every sense... It’s a rare pleasure to see and hear this fantastical masterpiece presented in such a thoroughly lovely rendition.”**

- Michael Sommers, New York Stage Review, 27 April 2019

**“Of this much I feel certain: Lady in the Dark is the greatest musical that hardly anyone has actually seen.”**

- David Fox, Purple Rose, 26 April 2019

**“[Lady in the Dark is] one of the finest and most complex musicals ever written”**

**New Lives for Deadly Sins**

Die sieben Todsünden (The Seven Deadly Sins) is one of Weill’s most beloved works, performed frequently throughout Europe and North America. The Sins remains timely, with its nexus of economic and social commentary handled with humor and poetic sensibility, bolstered by a varied and beautiful score that adds further commentary of its own. The work supports and rewards any number of interpretations and directional strategies.

In order to promote fully staged productions in even more varied settings, the Foundation, with support from the publisher, Schott Music, has commissioned a new orchestration for fifteen instrumentalists, prepared by HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel. The next several pages offer insights into the new version along with a more general overview of aspects of the Sins that make it such a perennially fascinating work, now on the cusp of a new era of opportunity.

HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel on the New Version for Fifteen Players

When the Foundation first considered the possibility of an alternate scoring for Die sieben Todsünden, our thoughts naturally turned to HK (Nali) Gruber, whose knowledge of the work is unsurpassed and whose sympathy with Weill is exemplary. There was just one problem: he is one of the most sought-after composers/conductors in the world, and his busy schedule would not permit him to do all the work himself. But he had an answer for that in the form of his associate Christian Muthspiel, Austrian composer/pianist/troubleshooting. Together, the two of them have prepared a new fifteen-piece orchestration, which will be available for licensing from Schott after the world premiere in September 2019.

**The Starting Point**

CM: Our overarching idea was to stay as close to the original as possible. At first we thought of making a much different version. But as I dug deeper into the score, I couldn’t imagine giving up this very unique Kurt Weill sound. Sometimes it was not easy to preserve the colors of the original score. For example, we didn’t use an oboe, but there are two or three very prominent parts in the original score when the oboe provides the color for a particular situation. It was hard to replace it. We finally came up with a combination of clarinet and very high bassoon. It wasn’t just maintaining the harmonies, but keeping the original colors and the way they change within the work.

HKG: We did not create our own colors; we always tried to stay as close to Weill’s instrumentation as possible. So, for instance, where the original score had two trumpets, the second trumpet is mostly replaced by a clarinet. But when the leading voice was the trumpet, we kept it in the trumpet. We tried to make sure that the smaller orchestra does not diminish the drama. The power and energy of the orchestra should be the same in this fifteen-instrument version. I want to hear the same piece.

**Instrumentation: adjustments and solutions**

CM: I did not add any instruments that weren’t in the original score, but I gave a more prominent role to the guitar, to replace the harp or to balance the attacks in the string section. The guitar and banjo parts are very important. Sometimes the original banjo part was unplayable or misleading, probably because Weill sat with the musician and worked out the chords with him. That can lead to a not-so-carefully notated part for the next player who comes along. I sat for days with a banjo player who has played Weill’s works many, many times. We went through every bar and made a foolproof version. Another challenge was the percussion part. I had to make all the changes between timpani and snare drum, tom-toms, and so forth, manageable with only one player. So I went over the entire piece thoroughly with the solo timpanist of the Radio Symphony Orchestra Vienna, and he saw to it that all the changes work. Now the percussion part is challenging for one person, but it’s playable.

If you have just five string instruments, one on each part, covering the double stops and maintaining a powerful string sound is a challenge. One thing we did was use open strings wherever possible to get more resonance.

HKG: The guitar in our version takes over for the harp, with help from the piano, if necessary. You have to give the guitar the exact chords from the harp part because that is absolutely necessary for the harmonic structure.

**Process**

CM: I started at the beginning of the piece and worked straight through to the end. But when I reached the end, I had learned so much about the instrumental possibilities that I had to go back and do a second round. I sat at my desk, and on my left was the orchestral score, on my right the piano score. When I couldn’t reconcile the two and they clashed in my brain, I knew I had to stop for the day. Actually, I had Nali’s conductor’s score with all his markings and dynamic changes as well. The chords had to be revisited in many places in order to retain the harmonic complexities. That’s where the piano score came in. Sometimes, rather than thinning out the orchestration, I built up from the piano score. The piano score is the bones, or the skeleton; the orchestral score is the flesh. I had to see the bones to understand the main harmonic ideas.

HKG: Christian has a computer that can play the score in slow motion but at the same pitch. When we had doubts about the structure and looked closely at the music, note by note, we noticed things that looked like mistakes, or that appeared to be mistakes Weill made back in 1933. But I discovered that these odd places were full of intellect and absolutely intentional. When you play this music in slow motion, you get much clearer insight into Weill’s chord progressions, which are very unusual.

**“unique in form and scope...[Lady in the Dark] was a seed from which sprang what we call the concept musical.”**

- Steven Suskin, New York Stage Review, 27 April 2019

**“The Starting Point”**

- HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel
Balance of soloist and orchestra

HKG: If a theater has a small pit, this version is perfect. Ensemble Modern, for instance, does chamber opera productions in the Bockenheimer Depot, a very small theater in the suburbs of Frankfurt. They could find a choreographer or director who would create a double bill with the Sins and another piece and tour it all over Germany. Or the Nederlands Dans Theater could tour with the new version. Often an ensemble wants to do small and large scores in the same evening, and the new version allows for that, too.

We have so many great small ensembles for new music: London Sinfonietta, Klangforum Wien, Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Intercontemporain Paris, Musikfabrik Köln, ASKO/Schönberg Amsterdam, Avanti Helsinki, to name a few. All these avant-garde ensembles create many more performance possibilities than before. You can program the Sins with Elliott Carter, or Harrison Birtwistle, or John Adams. And that’s very good for the piece.

CM: The idea of this version is to give smaller theaters, and non-operatic voices, a chance to do this beautiful work. It’s a great opportunity for a new world of interpreters, because chamber orchestras, or theaters with a small orchestra, can play the work now.

Importance of text and message

CM: I spent months with this score, and with Brecht’s great lyrics, and I was totally touched. It’s more current than twenty years ago. This poor girl is beaten down at every step until she loses all her resistance, and the attacks on her stand for all the attacks women and poor people have to endure. But of course it needs an audience that is open and willing to think critically. It’s a very poetic text, and it speaks in metaphors and symbols, so you have to go deep to get it.

HKG: The Brecht text is not a period piece. It is absolutely contemporary. In our day, The Seven Deadly Sins is a manifesto against capitalism run amok, and it’s a dangerous piece—for the capitalists. Because it lays bare how our world works: if you are honest, you have to pay the price, here, during this life. It is even more timely than it was twenty or thirty years ago.

The last word

HKG: It is absolutely the same piece and it is the same composer’s “handwriting.” And if Kurt came to Vienna for a tiny little vacation and looked at our score, I’m convinced he would say, “Oh, that’s my piece! Thank you.”

Ensemble Modern and the Premiere

The premiere of the new orchestration of Die sieben Todsünden will be given on 21 September 2019 at Beethovenfest Bonn by one of Europe’s leading virtuoso groups, Ensemble Modern, conducted by HK Gruber with soprano Sarah Maria Sun. We asked two members of the group, General Manager Christian Fausch and violist Jagdish Mistry, to comment on the premiere in the context of the long and rich history of Ensemble Modern’s engagement with Weill’s music.

We’ll combine the Sins with Schoenberg’s Pierrot lunaire on the program. It’s telling that we put Kurt Weill and Schoenberg together, because Weill is as important a composer in our history as Schoenberg and Webern. Kurt Weill has accompanied the Ensemble Modern at some of the most important junctures in our musical life. One of our first best-sellers was the CD Berlin im Licht, a collection of lesser-known short works, conducted by HK Gruber, released just after the Berlin Wall came down. We should also mention the recording of Die Dreigroschenoper (1999), another huge success, again with Nali Gruber. These projects are milestones in the history of Ensemble Modern, and our collaboration with the Foundation.

Our latest Weill recording includes Chansons des quais, Kleine Dreigroschenmusik, and Mahagonny Songspiel (see review on p. 16). From a musical-dramatic point of view, these three compositions are all smaller or reworked versions of larger works. So the new version of the Sins makes a nice continuation. Both the Sins and Chansons des quais convey hard truths about the world in quite different ways. Chansons des quais is about a prostitute and her family, and about the brutality she confronts in these songs Weill is very much trying to show unadorned social reality: it’s not even satire. Die sieben Todsünden is also about social criticism, but here Weill approaches it through a kind of parody. He was dealing with the same subject from different perspectives. In that way these works held together very well.

In both works, you have a woman protagonist subject to male brutality. She is really oppressed, on the one hand, but on the other hand Weill is drawing attention to the strength of women whose lives are so blighted.

The new orchestration will certainly give smaller groups the opportunity to program this fantastic piece. We hope the Sins will take on new life with this new version, and we hope it inspires other artists to take another look at this piece and its potential. Of course the theatrical possibilities are obvious, and the political and social satire come through strongly; all Weill’s music has this bite. If you read this work correctly, you pick up the satire; even if you don’t read it correctly, it still communicates sheer energy and enjoyment. We’re hoping that this new version will inspire someone to create a dance or film, or a work in some other medium that would complement it. We will do our best to give the new version a good start in September.

Sarah Maria Sun works with us regularly, and we suggested her for the premiere of the Sins. She is one of these singers who can go in a lot of different directions. She has a very delicate—but she also has the strength to project the personality needed for the Sins. We’ve done many different kinds of music with her and we’re convinced that she is an excellent choice for this first performance of the new version of the Sins.

We are thrilled to start a new chapter in our longstanding collaboration with the Foundation, and we look forward to the next steps. We’re extremely proud also of our work with HK Gruber. He really brings a color to these works, a sense of phrasing and timing, and of course his own indescribable voice. Our generation will never hear Weill in any other way.
Many Voices

Listed within the gray bars on either side of this spread are the names of some of the hundreds of artists who have sung the role of the lead character, Anna. Even a quick glance confirms that the Sins has played host to an extraordinarily wide range of vocal styles. Operas and Lieder singers: Measha Brueggergosman, Susan Graham, Angelika Kirchschlager, Teresa Statas, Annie Sofie von Otter, and many more. Musical theater specialists: Georgia Brown, Ute Lemper, Patti LuPone, Dagmar Manzel, Milva, and the list goes on. Pop and cabaret singers? Plenty of those, too: Marianne Faithfull, Storm Large, Moow Meow, Peaches, Martha Wainwright. Not to mention all those singers who don’t fit neatly into any category, starting with the original, Lotte Lenya herself, and continuing in a line stretching from Cleo Laine, Gisela May, and Hanne Wieder, through Hanna Schygulla and Helen Schneider, up to Shara Nova, Lisa Vroman, and Audra McDonald.

Nowadays, the work is most frequently performed in its high-voice version as originally composed by Weill. Still, the three prominent recordings shown below illustrate, both literally and figuratively, the range of singers who have brought their artistry to the work. Listening to them all, it’s worth remembering Weill scholar David Drew’s caution born of experience:

“… there may be some agreement that the high-voice version obviates dangerous comparisons with Lenya’s mature interpretation and frees the soloist from the tie of hallowed tradition. … Even for trained singers who really understand what the score requires of them, and what it does not require, Die sieben Todsünden is far from simple.”

In 1956, Lotte Lenya recorded Die sieben Todsünden as a version modified to accommodate the lower range of her mature voice. Movements in which Anna I appears are transposed down a fourth while the others are unchanged. The transpositions required the arranger to alter Weill’s orchestrations.

Sony 82876 78754 2

Annie Sofie von Otter recorded the Sins in 1994, at a time when many singers had come to fear the original version of the work. A mezzo-soprano, she had no difficulty with the required vocal range.

Deutsche Grammophon 439 894-2

For her 1989 recording, Marianne Faithfull also used the original key version, but took the vocal line down an entire octave, which resulted in some unusual effects.

RCA Victor 74211 0119 2

Women’s Perspectives

Over the years, critical commentary on the Sins has tended to focus on topics such as Brecht’s Marxism or the psychology of the dual nature of the Anna character(s) embodied respectively by singer and dancer. The highly charged gender dynamics at play in the piece is an area ripe for fresh consideration in future interpretations. Collected below are a few comments from female artists who have been involved in past productions.

“As soon as we started work on the piece, we realized just how relevant it is for our own times. As soon as you have any major financial crisis, people start evaluating what really matters to them. They’re forced to look at the place money has in their lives. Not just the comfort it can buy, but the status, the power, the feeling of security. And when that doesn’t feel secure any more, they have to look at what is truly important to them. Seven Deadly Sins is all about those questions. The ones you ask yourself—usually when you’re having a sleepless night. Like, what would I give up? How much of myself am I willing to lose? Is the money, the power, whatever, really worth it?”

--director-choreographer Kally Lloyd Jones

“(Die sieben Todsünden) was one of the most gratifying works I ever performed, not because it was easy but because it was so hard. Weill’s score for symphonic orchestra is captivating. Brecht’s ingenious libreto is a great success. Getting everything right—the musical demands, the heights and depths of Anna’s character, getting to the bottom of her contradictions, and bringing it all to life through dance—was an immense undertaking.”

--sänger Gisela May

“The role I liked best of any was Anna I in Weill’s Seven Deadly Sins. It’s total theater—singing, dancing, acting—they are one.”

--sängerin Lotte Lenya

“In The Seven Deadly Sins as usually danced, and as Brecht wrote it, women are mere metaphor. Anna I, the singer, represents the forces of duty, hypocrisy, and lower-middle-class virtue; her alter ego Anna II, the dancer, embodies rebellion and capitulation to those forces. … [Pina] Bausch takes Anna out of the realm of metaphor. Neither words nor music had to be changed … [Her] radical shift is in the point of view: Anna II is seen from the inside, by female eyes, and the staging flows from that. She is someone to whom these things—being cynical, shrug no longer apply, and the savagery of Brecht’s words, the irony of Weill’s music, jumps out.”

--critic Erika Monk

“The Seven Deadly Sins has an element of darkness but it is a cautionary tale and a great story. The emotion and the passion and the power comes from Anna’s humanity. … Anna II is seen from the inside, by female eyes, and the staging flows from that. She is someone to whom these things—being forced, in work and love, to sell herself—really happen. The satirical nudge and cynical shrug no longer apply, and the savagery of Brecht’s words, the irony of Weill’s music, jumps out.”

--dancer Allegra Kent

Over the years, the piece is an area ripe for fresh consideration in future interpretations. Collected below are a few comments from female artists who have been involved in past productions.
Envisioning Stagings

The Sins has been a magnet for the attention of a wide range of distinguished directors and choreographers. Listed within the gray bar at the left of this page are the names of just a few. The theatrical imagery conjured in the realization of the piece has been striking and varied.

Creative Programming

Often called a ballet chanté, the Sins comes to life in a land between genres, equally at home in opera houses, dance spaces, concert halls, and—with the advent of the new Gruber-Muthspiel version—smaller alternative spaces. Its duration of thirty-five minutes allows for similar staging of the Sins. Notable versions come from 1976 and an operatic version of the work with the one-act operas Der Protagonist and a new orchestration of the Songspiel. A new critical edition of the Sins and a new orchestration of the Sins is due in 2020. Producers may embrace the opportunity to cast a wide net.

A review of the historical record reveals a surprising number of solutions. Programs have included a wide range indeed of companion works, with no consistent practice emerging even after sixty years of stagings. Producers may embrace the opportunity to commission a new work, an approach in step with the Sins. Such choices show a strong bias toward twentieth-century music, but programmers sometimes can complement the Sins with works from other eras. From 1976 to this day, whenever Tanztheater Wuppertal gives Pina Bausch's legendary version of the Sins, it is coupled with “Fürchtet euch nicht,” her own choreographed selection of Weill's songs.

Presentations of Die sieben Todsünden in the new orchestration will be eligible for support through the Foundation’s grant program. Application deadline: 1 November.

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