

Lady in the Dark

New York
MasterVoices

25–27 April 2019

Audiences and critics lauded the vast array of artists whose collective talents brought *Lady in the Dark* back to the New York stage for three extraordinary performances. With the luminous Victoria Clark as Liza, Ted Sperling directed and conducted a production that included Doug Varone’s dancers, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the MasterVoices choir, a cast of distinguished musical theater performers, and contributions from three visiting costume designers. With imaginative staging alongside exceptional musical values, this event was essentially an economically produced yet full realization of the play.

The production solved the problem that has made *Lady* so intimidating: the profound spectacular, technological, and budgetary demands of the dream sequences. While much was made of the spectacle of the original production in 1941—with its elaborate props, visual sumptuousness, and the mechanical wizardry of its turntables—one of the most revelatory aspects of this production arose from its use of dance: Doug Varone’s remarkably theatrical choreography showed definitively that dance can bring Liza’s dreams to life, without sacrificing any of the power of her imagination. Varone’s talented dancers did more than merely illustrate the songs; instead, the movement enhanced the dreams powerfully by endowing them with an otherworldly dimension. Those considering a production of *Lady in the Dark* should be heartened by this experiment, though when it comes to filling a stage, it doesn’t hurt to have a world-class dance company backed by a 120-voice choir! And on the subject of visual riches, one cannot overlook the efforts of costume designer Tracy Christensen, who coordinated the guest designers’ work. Of particular note was Zac Posen’s magnificent blue gown for Clark in the “Glamour Dream,” which fittingly drew all eyes to Liza.

For longtime enthusiasts of *Lady in the Dark*, one of the most fascinating elements of this production was Moss Hart’s book, as adapted by Hart’s son, Christopher, and Kim H. Kowalke. This version tightened the script, revealing that *Lady* could be presented coherently in much shorter form. Besides eliminating superfluous dialogue, the adaptation dispensed with most of the action taking place in the *Allure* magazine office. These condensations abbreviated Maggie’s part considerably, and Alison’s even more, but they brought out nicely the essential relationship between Liza and Charley. The denouement scene in which Liza dispatches her suitors Kendall and Randy set the stage more efficiently for her and Charley’s reconciliation.

The adaptation also served to empower Liza, tempering some of the domesticating impulses of the published script. Less was made, for example, of Liza’s severe, austere appearance. Further, not only does Liza approach her analyst, Dr. Brooks, more directly, but the unraveling of her problem—the dialogue in which



Liza (Victoria Clark) at the end of “Saga of Jenny”

PHOTO: RICHARD TERMINE

Liza’s childhood traumas are explored—has been made more collaborative. Liza no longer appears as a puzzle to be “solved” by Dr. Brooks; instead, they are on a shared journey of understanding. The change in their dynamic was complemented by casting Dr. Brooks as a woman, thereby avoiding the sense that only a male psychoanalyst could solve the woman’s problem. And crucially, the answer to this woman’s problem did not involve finding the right man. The adapted script eliminates the suggestion that Liza would end up deferring to Charley, and it also does away with Liza’s speech in which she characterizes Randy and Kendall as dependent children who need her as a mother. Instead, the conclusion finds Liza and Charley collaborating on the magazine, with only a hint of potential romance.

Victoria Clark was quite simply perfect as Liza, giving the character’s anxiety full voice while resisting the text’s occasional suggestion of hysteria. Clark’s urbane soprano was lustrous, especially in “The Saga of Jenny.” Montego Glover was a likeable Maggie, less acerbic than usual—perhaps as a result of Maggie’s wry comebacks having been mostly excised from the script. Ashley Park scored laughs as a slightly ditzy Miss Foster, as did David Pittu, playing the foppish Russell in high camp style—his “Tchaikovsky” was a highlight. Ben Davis soared on “This is New,” and Christopher Innvar brought virile energy to his portrayal of Charley, the office cad. Ron Raines, one of the great male singers of the Broadway stage, was an effective Kendall, though one couldn’t help wishing he had more to sing. And Amy Irving, a warm, engaging Dr. Brooks, opens the show with the famous line, “I am listening.” The Orchestra of St. Luke’s sounded especially rich under Sperling’s baton, and the force of the MasterVoices choir made Liza’s dream sequences particularly potent, especially when the chorus is asked to speak back to Liza.

A three-performance run was all too brief for such an impeccably executed affair, leaving one to hope that this exceptional cast will be immortalized in a recording.

Bradley Rogers
Duke University

Symphony No. 2

London Symphony Orchestra
Lahav Shani, conductor

28 February 2019

There is no obvious reason Weill's Second Symphony is such a rarity in London's concert halls. A quick glance at the BBC Proms archive reveals the astonishing information that the one and only time the work was featured was way back in 1968. Moreover, no major London orchestra seems to have programmed the Symphony in recent years, apart from the BBC Concert Orchestra in 2013. Perhaps the unaccountable neglect of this work can be attributed to the totally misguided notion that Weill's contribution to abstract orchestral genres pales when compared to his achievement as a music theater composer. Yet I can think of a more plausible argument: although the Symphony has been well-represented in commercial recordings, thus far it has lacked a charismatic interpreter sufficiently committed to the music to ensure that it gets a fair hearing in the concert hall.

That situation is surely about to change with the arrival of young Israeli conductor Lahav Shani. His impressive debut with the London Symphony Orchestra, in front of a large and enthusiastic audience at the Barbican Hall, placed Weill's Symphony alongside two twentieth-century classics: Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*, with Simon Trpčeski as a mercurial soloist, and the 1947 version of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.

The concert took place only hours after the announcement of the death of the orchestra's former principal conductor, André Previn. Given Previn's strong commitment to twentieth-century orchestral repertoire, it seemed entirely appropriate that this program should be dedicated to his memory. Although the conductor apparently never featured Weill's music in a symphony concert, as a jazz pianist he was a strong advocate, releasing a pioneering LP in 1961 devoted entirely to improvisations on some of Weill's most famous songs from the Weimar Republic. A further intriguing connection between Previn and Weill: both artists were forced to leave Germany for the U.S. after the Nazi takeover. This tangible link between Weill and Previn undoubtedly brought an extra degree of poignancy to the Second Symphony, composed around the time of Weill's exile and undoubtedly colored by the particularly fraught and uncertain circumstances facing the composer when it was written.

From the very first bars, Shani's strong commitment to the work was evident. Conducting from memory, he secured brilliant and responsive playing from the LSO. The *Sostenuto* introduction to the first movement was invested with just the right degree of menace before the doleful, bittersweet trumpet solo, expressively played by Nicholas Betts. The *Allegro molto* was projected with considerable rhythmic dynamism, building up quite a head of steam in the agitated development section and in the closing bars of the movement. I was particularly impressed by the way Shani controlled his large orchestral forces. The strings were warmly expressive when shaping Weill's melodies, but also remarkably fleet-footed in the faster passagework. At the lower end of the dynamic spectrum, orchestral balance was carefully maintained

to allow the all-important wind and brass solos to cut through the overall texture.

The central *Largo* poses quite a challenge. Adopting a purposeful flowing tempo tends to undermine the grim, tragic elements so inherent to the music. On the other hand, if the conductor views the movement as a 1930s reincarnation of a Mahlerian funeral march, it can easily sound unwieldy and aimless. Shani, however, managed to effect an admirable compromise. His tempo was weighty and slow, but never ponderous, and the essential trombone solo was performed with exactly the right balance between gravitas and melancholy by Blair Sinclair. Once again, the key to Shani's success rested on the astonishing variety of color he extracted from the orchestra and in his careful negotiating of the ebb and flow of the musical argument, sometimes meltingly lovely, as in the agonizingly expressive, almost Schubertian, turn to the major key in the strings, but also emotionally overwhelming at the big climaxes, especially the shattering solo timpani strokes near the movement's close.

The tricky semiquaver passagework opening the Finale caught the LSO off guard with a few moments of slightly imprecise ensemble. But this proved to be a temporary lapse, and the winds and brass led a particularly jaunty and rhythmically taut rendition of the middle section. Shani steered the increasingly agitated *stringendo* in the final bars to a breathtaking and breathless conclusion.

It was fascinating to hear the Weill alongside the Rachmaninov, particularly since both works were composed at roughly the same time. Despite the fact that the two composers' musical idioms seem worlds apart, both works are imbued with a similar degree of unease and grotesquerie, features that resonate strongly with the social and political turbulence facing Europe in the early 1930s.

Erik Levi
London

Lahav Shani on Symphony No. 2

It's one of my favorite pieces to conduct with orchestras across the world; I've also recorded it with the Rotterdam Philharmonic.

When we think about Kurt Weill the first thing that comes to mind is theater music and the songs. Of course you'll find the same style but . . . it's fully symphonic—symphonic writing and symphonic development. I think it'd really surprise you if you'd only heard songs by Weill. It's a shame it isn't performed more.

You could hear a bit of Mahler and Shostakovich, but the style and harmony are very personal and unique. It's really not comparable to anything else. It's a big loss for the classical music world that he didn't write more like this.

Condensed from LSO blog: <http://tinyurl.com/y49rm3fy>

Street Scene

Oper Köln

Premiere: 28 April 2019

When *Street Scene* was first staged in Germany in 1955 (five years after Weill's death), the critics reacted with confusion if not outright disdain. Today things have changed. Among Weill's American works, *Street Scene* has laid the firmest foundation in German theaters. The strict division between "serious" and "light" music has softened, and the distinction between opera and musical had started to blur even before Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* arrived. Even outside the larger metropolitan areas there are performers who can sing, act, and dance respectably. Furthermore, German society is far more diverse, due to a wave of immigration that began coincidentally in 1955, the year the West German government first recruited guest workers from southern Europe.

Despite such shifts, the ethos of *Street Scene* cannot be readily transferred to Germany in 2019; twenty-five years after its trailblazing run in Ludwigshafen and Berlin, the historical distance has grown considerably. Extramarital affairs no longer have the same power to scandalize, and the "street scene" depicted in the opera isn't realistic any more. Few city-dwellers hang out on the sidewalks—partly because more homes have air conditioners than they used to—and those who do busy themselves with their smartphones rather than interact with their neighbors. So Oper Köln and its coproducers Teatro Real Madrid and Opéra de Monte-Carlo have made the reasonable decision to maintain historical distance and leave the libretto in the original English. The production still must offer a gripping performance and show us ways to see ourselves in others.

John Fulljames's staging succeeds in placing the focus on the central family's tragedy. Frank Maurant is a hard-hearted, withdrawn father, who longs for the simplicity of bygone times as he faces ever-growing complexity—a type still often encountered in today's world. With an impressive array of gestures, looks, and nuanced speaking as well as singing, Oliver Zwarg lends him a hint of vulnerability that creates some sympathy for this disagreeable character. Allison Oakes portrays Anna Maurant as an unhappy and love-starved wife who escapes more and more into daydreams and her affair with the milkman's bill collector, Sankey (Florian Reiners). And Emily Hindrichs plays the Maurants' daughter, Rose, with real depth, showing how her confident knowledge of the world combined with a strong sense of foreboding keep her from taking sides; eventually she makes up her own mind. All three received prolonged acclaim from the audience. By contrast, Thomas Elwin's Sam appears a little stiff. The cast of neighbors makes it plain that they are not just passive observers of the developing tragedy; they actually fuel it—a deeply disturbing aspect of the work.

Guest conductor Tim Murray and the Gürzenich Orchestra bring out the action's musical foundation in great detail. One can clearly hear the score's various references, be it the *Tristan* allu-



The children's choir, clad in yellow, brown, and green, at the beginning of Act II

PHOTO: PAUL LECLAIRE

sion at Sankey's seemingly harmless entrance or the fate motif shortly before the final chord. And I never noticed so clearly how the musical worlds of Frank, Anna, and Rose clash irreconcilably in No. 16 ("There'll Be Trouble"); Weill's musical dramaturgy shows that they no longer can come together as an ensemble or as a family.

The staging lacks the feel and atmosphere of the street. Rather than rowhouses, set designer Dick Bird employs a semi-transparent metal scaffolding as a unit set. That solution permits a view of the orchestra, which is placed upstage, as the company's temporary quarters in the Staatenhaus lacks a pit. But it is hard to get a sense of which movements inside the set are part of the action and which aren't. The program notes report on the effects of the Great Depression, but the set seems too picturesque despite a few trash cans and hydrants. Dim lighting makes it difficult to distinguish between residents and passersby costumed in subdued shades of yellow, brown, and green, so it's a good thing the performers are so successful in lending their roles individual flair through diction, singing, and acting. During dialogue scenes, and occasionally during musical numbers, the pace is too quick, so that most of the audience cannot follow the German supertitles, and they miss several witty lines. An overly fast tempo also fails to convey the feeling of scorching heat that causes both exhaustion and aggression. In the crowd scenes in Act II, the director does not distinguish sufficiently between random onlookers and more or less involved neighbors, even though there are only two fleeting moments during which both groups unite to form a community. In the finale, several policemen struggle to maintain order when the agitated crowd pushes forward, but Weill's music talks about something else entirely here—compassion.

**Andreas Hauff
Mainz**

The Cradle Will Rock

New York
Classic Stage Company

Premiere: 3 April 2019

America's greatest musical theater chronicler, Gerald Bordman, heir to a large business fortune, described *The Cradle Will Rock* as "a hate-warped tract which sadly saw everything in black and white," though he conceded it was "skillfully wrought." A rare dissent from the general acclaim accorded this 1930s masterpiece. Fittingly, the Classic Stage Company has just conferred "classic" status on *Cradle* in an enjoyable if cranky production directed by the controversial Scots-born John Doyle, the American musical's leading current practitioner of *Regietheater*.

As a director of musical revivals, Doyle is an antic auteurist, known for casting actors who can play musical instruments well enough to double as the onstage orchestra and choreographing this ensemble as a kind of collectively mutating amoeba-like entity. He typically abbreviates and streamlines the book and reduces cast sizes through multiple doublings. Whenever Doyle has been a traditionalist director I have found his work thoroughly delightful (e.g., the 2011 *Encores!* production of *Where's Charley?*). But when he sticks to his signature devices I generally experience both plot confusion and theatrical bewilderment. To what end this gimmickry? Does it illuminate the underlying drama usefully, or is it just a clever way to lower production costs and attract notoriety at the same time?

One might assume that Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, with its hallowed tradition of minimalist staging and solo piano accompaniment, would adamantly resist a Doyle-style staging. In the event, the Classic Stage Company revival is fairly successful as entertainment, while at the same time displaying much of what is problematic about this director's approach.

Blitzstein writes in broad comic-strip brushstrokes, and Doyle catches that spirit sometimes, as in the repeated gesture of having Mr. and Mrs. Mister shower piles of greenbacks on everyone in Steeltown, half-burying Larry Foreman during the climactic scene. Yet there were not many laughs from the audience. True, Blitzstein himself later thought his jokes were lame. Even so, a line like "And I got a date with a fig—get it?," delivered with the proper timing and nuance, can still be funny, but wasn't here.

CSC's small theater-in-the-round works well for *Cradle*; the intimacy makes the drama more immediate and involving. The 1983 Acting Company production directed by John Houseman, done behind a proscenium at the American Place Theatre, felt too distanced emotionally, whereas the 1964 revival at the intimate Theatre Four, directed by Howard da Silva, was enveloping and compelling. (I saw them both.) Doyle's staging relies on bright, direct lighting, always rousing but lacking in *chiaroscuro*. It is blessedly free of amplification (although Lara Pulver's and Rema Webb's singing voices are too small to fill the space). All the characters are attired in generic factory overalls, even Mrs.

Mister. Why? Because management and labor are cut from the same cloth? (Huh?) A giant utility pole connected to an endless network of wires is the only backdrop—a symbol of communication, get it? (Communication of what?) The performers manipulate huge metal industrial canisters to create all the sound effects, from gunshots to explosions.

The show's pacing is very lively, but it all goes by a little too fast. I pictured Doyle sometimes as a track coach with a whistle, urging the performers to speed it up. The ten scenes are played without intermission (a choice Blitzstein sanctioned but which is rarely implemented in revivals), yet the audience needs that break to absorb what they've just seen. With an intermission, Larry Foreman, heralded but unseen throughout Act One, emerges more convincingly as a *deus ex machina* in Act Two. The snappy pace worked for Tony Yazbeck's rendering of the title tune but not for "Nickel under the Foot," which is an expansive anthem meant to slow things down, not a song to jogtrot through as Lara Pulver was directed to do. Other questionable choices: the deletion of Rev. Salvation's repeated tag line, "Collection!," seemed tin-eared to me; Blitzstein's dialogue itself is musical and deserves respect. (Besides, what dramatic momentum is gained by the deletion of a single word?) The cast shouts "The Cradle Will Rock!" in unison to open the show—which effectively destroys the delicate nocturnal atmosphere of Moll's opening ballad, "I'm checkin' home now," as Blitzstein wrote it. David Garrison plays Mr. Mister humorlessly, more a dour Koch Brother than an amusing operetta-ish caricature.

The acting of the ten players is well etched enough that their frequent morphing in and out of multiple roles does not confuse. Gender doesn't figure in the role doublings; women play Dauber and Professor Trixie. Four cast members take turns playing the piano accompaniment (four-handed, at one point); they are amazingly effective and precise.

A spirit of fun pervades this production, but there is too little compensating darkness. The audience left the theater energized but not thinking enough about what they had just seen.

Mark N. Grant
New York



Dauber (Rema Webb), Mrs. Mister (Sally Ann Triplett), and Yasha (Ian Lowe)

PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

Mahagonny Songspiel, Chansons des quais, Kleine Dreigroschenmusik

Ute Gfrerer, Winnie Böwe, amarcord
Ensemble Modern
HK Gruber, conductor

Ensemble Modern Medien EMCD-040

These are world premiere recordings of the new critical edition of *Mahagonny Songspiel*—which restores several previously omitted passages, corrects notational errors, and clarifies the work's ending—and the reordered cycle of numbers from *Marie galante* conceived by Kim H. Kowalke, *Chansons des quais*.

Because of the failure of the original production and Weill's departure from France soon after, the score of *Marie galante* remains largely unfamiliar. Nonetheless, HK Gruber has long treasured the music and takes great care with this performance, conducting each number with *élan* and ideal tempos. Ensemble Modern responds with energy and beautifully shaded tonal color, shifting instantly from high intensity to aching delicacy. The Intermezzo is genuinely beautiful, the “Tango habanera” has solid tonal weight, and the foxtrot (“Scène au dancing”) blazes with an energy that impels listeners to dance. The rhythm section (piano, guitar, percussion) is unfailingly good, full of subtle variety and crisp articulation. The singing is generally fine. Perhaps the vocal ensemble amarcord tries a little too hard to impersonate lascivious, drunken sailors in “Les filles de Bordeaux” but is excellent otherwise. If Ute Gfrerer doesn't quite match Lys Gauty's intense, hymn-like recording of “J'attends un navire,” she comes into her own in “Le train du ciel” with compelling intensity and rising fervor, guided by Gruber's perfect pacing.

The music of *Die Dreigroschenoper* is deceptively simple; in reality it is difficult to find tempos in which the rhythms spring and “shimmy” without sounding hectic. Many performances just settle for playing too fast. Weill's metronome markings for *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, generally unchanged from the stage work, may seem slow; while Gruber doesn't follow them slavishly, he has an unerring sense for the right, unhurried tempo. Ensemble Modern's precise and subtly nuanced command of the articulation also helps. Their measured pace in the Overture suits its satirical Baroque styling perfectly and makes space for the opposing contrapuntal phrases. The tempo of the combined “Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens” and “Moritat” lends a wry jauntiness, and trombonist Uwe Dierksen's wonderfully stylish phrasing sings over the gently swinging “barrel-organ” accom-

paniment. The excellent rhythm section drives the “Anstatt-daß Song” under the vivacious and incisive clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone solos. Though perhaps both a little fast, the “Ballade vom angenehmen Leben” is delivered with cheeky elegance and pervasive swing while the raucous “Kanonen-Song” maintains explosive verve without losing control. The dance band-like sonorities come through with consistently vibrant color and admirable textural clarity. Gruber avoids sentimentality in “Pollys Lied” and elicits a yearning melancholy from his players in the “Tango-Ballade,” pacing it and the Finale with unsurpassed care.

An oblique narrative structure combined with allusive and tonally ambiguous music make *Mahagonny Songspiel* one of Weill's most daringly innovative works and pose considerable expressive and technical demands. Rising to the challenge, Gruber deftly captures the varying moods within each section, and his superlative command of pacing through all the intricate tempo changes achieves satisfying dramatic momentum across the entire work. Among the instrumental interludes, the processional March (following “I. Mahagonny-Song”) has great coolness but does not lack for expressive punch. Gruber directs the swirling *Vivace* passages (following “Alabama-Song” and II. Mahagonny-Song) and the forceful climax (close of “III. Mahagonny-Song”) with close attention to the harmonic direction so that the phrases are always subtly shaped. The Chorale (following “Benares-Song”) is played with great intensity; its dense, sinuous harmonies are wonderfully shaped and impeccably voiced—not easy with such a disparate instrumental line-up. Ensemble Modern's mastery of the sonority renders the strident harmonies thrillingly clear, and

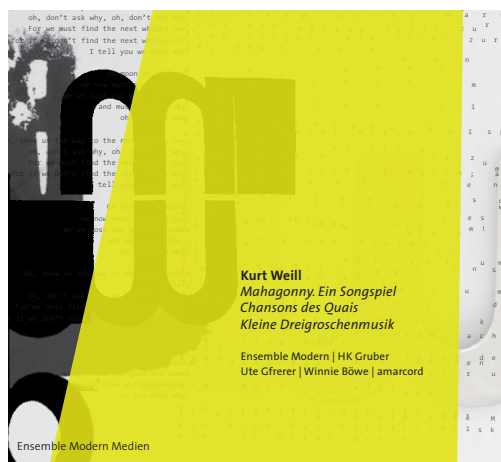
their dynamic and color shifts (without any loss of tonal focus) are delightful. The angularity of texture and melody is never smoothed over or made to sound too easy. Solos and duets are stylish and accurate, notably from Jagdish Mistry, violin, and Lutz Koppetsch, alto saxophone.

Gruber gives ample space to the singers for expression and clarity of text even through Weill's trickiest vocal rhythms. Gfrerer and Böwe sing “Alabama-Song” with soulful ease and rise powerfully to the fantastic canonic duet. In the four-part passages, the men's voices lock together wonderfully, achieving remarkable accuracy of intonation and rigorous rhythmic

urgency as well as lightness and swing. They are somewhat underpowered in solo lines: the demanding lead role approaches a *Heldentenor* quality and the bass “voice of God” demands a deeper richness. For me, the “Benares-Song” is also a weak spot. A weary lament of disillusion and longing, it feels here too much like a nightclub song with self-conscious *rubato* and sliding at odds with the expression. But these are mere quibbles with truly outstanding performances.

The producer, Udo Wüstendorfer, has captured vivid, well-balanced recorded sound and the CD booklet offers complete texts with translations, notes, and biographies.

Philip Headlam
Berlin



Four Walt Whitman Songs and other works

Ian Bostridge, tenor; Antonio Pappano, piano

Warner Classics 0190295661564

As the *Newsletter* reported last fall, Weill's setting of four Civil War poems by Walt Whitman has lately begun to receive the welcome denied to it in the years since its composition during and just after World War II. There have been over thirty performances in the last ten years, many of them by the English tenor Ian Bostridge. Now Bostridge, with pianist Antonio Pappano, has made his first recording of the cycle, part of a CD entitled *Requiem: The Pity of War* commemorating the Armistice that ended World War I. The recording also includes songs by Gustav Mahler and by two composers killed in the war, George Butterworth and Rudi Stephan.

The use of Whitman's Civil War poetry to mourn losses wrought by later wars has a long history, stretching from the Boer War (Charles Wood), World War I (Gustav Holst), World War II (Paul Hindemith and Karl Amadeus Hartmann, as well as Weill), and the Vietnam War (Ned Rorem). For Weill, who was seeking American citizenship and had long admired Whitman, reorienting Whitman's poetry from one total war to another offered the opportunity to assume a distinctively American voice and to affirm his patriotic bona fides. He chose his texts accordingly, preferring—with one exception—sweeping symbolic statements to poems rooted in Whitman's first-hand experience as a volunteer nurse. In December 1941 and January 1942 he composed "O Captain! My Captain!," "Dirge for Two Veterans," and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" In 1947 he added a setting of "Come Up from the Fields, Father," a much more intimate poem focused precisely on the pity of war. In his final ordering of the cycle, Weill placed "Come Up from the Fields" third. It stands as the site where the historical toll of the war, invoked in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and mourned in "O Captain! My Captain!," takes on personal form in the loss of a son. That loss reverberates in the concluding "Dirge for Two Veterans."

The poems Weill set in 1941–42 are written in regular stanzas, unusual for Whitman but amenable to the traditions of German art song, which Weill's music both echoes and travesties. "Beat! Beat! Drums!" stands out in this respect. Its violence echoes that of Mahler's "Revelge"—also on the CD, also evocative of a beating drum. The exception, "Come Up from the Fields, Father," stands out for other reasons. It is written in Whitman's typical open-form free verse. Weill's setting responds with music that abandons a quasi-strophic impulse for a dramatic thrust that peaks violently and reluctantly subsides. But the song also connects with the *Lied* tradition via musical allusions to Schubert's "Erlkönig." Both songs concern the loss of a son.

The performances on this CD show a keen sense of drama, especially with Weill and Mahler. Lyric beauty is there when

needed, particularly for Butterworth and Stephan, but it is more means than end. The performers never forget their overall conception, which clearly shapes the rendition of each song. The dramatic impetus is particularly impressive in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and "Revelge," which receive uninhibited performances that evoke the pity of war by demonstrating its obverse, a pitiless vehemence bordering on mania. Bostridge, who sings beautifully in the segments of "Revelge" marked for momentary relief from "marching toward death," turns genuinely ugly (to be clear: this is a compliment) when voicing the ironic faux-gaiety of the refrain "tra-la-li, tra-la-ley." "Beat! Beat! Drums!" is perhaps even more impressive. The song calls for waves of mounting intensity on slowly ascending vocal lines. Bostridge apportions the rise in dynamic level and vocal fullness so that each wave in itself and the succession of waves reach a strong climax. Similarly, he voices the titular refrain with ever-increasing staccato, so that by the end he is virtually spitting it out. The performers bring out the urgency of the song by taking a somewhat faster tempo than Weill's "Moderato assai (not fast)," which in this case is just the right choice.

Taken together, the performances of the four Whitman songs follow yet another wave pattern that alternates intensity with palpable, hence expressive, restraint. In "Come Up from the Fields, Father," Bostridge and Pappano bring out the poem's descending narrative arc from observation to vexed compassion by heightening—but not too much—the contrasts in tempo and vocal character. "O Captain!" and "Dirge" dwell on a quiet lyricism that belongs more to Weill than to Whitman; the dramatic outburst in each song gets its full due, but only as a foil to the lyrical musing that frames and finally curbs it. Other approaches to this music are obviously possible, but the performances on this CD are memorable and, on their own terms, exemplary.

Lawrence Kramer
Fordham University



Die sieben Todsünden and other works

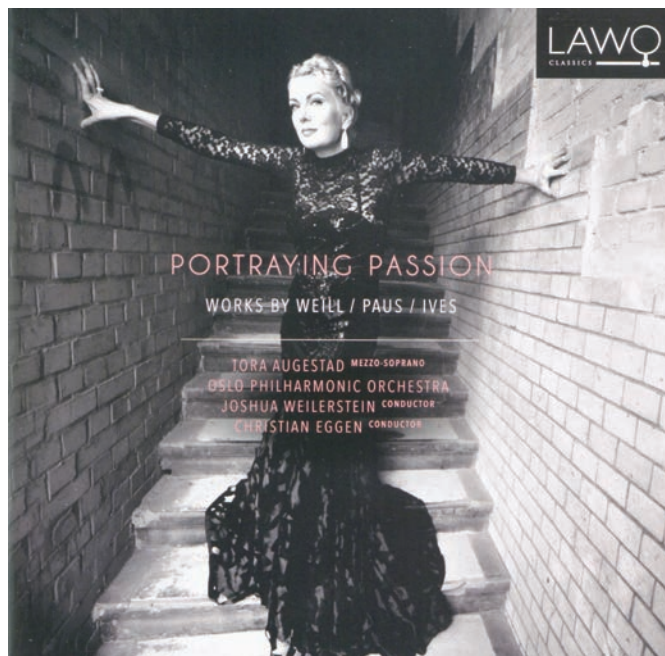
Tora Augestad, mezzo-soprano
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra
Joshua Weilerstein, conductor

LAWO Classics LWC1164

Tora Augestad is notable for performing in a wide range of works and contexts, from Baroque opera excerpts to newly commissioned works; her master's degree from the Norwegian Academy of Music is in cabaret singing. She won a Lys Symonette Award at the Lotte Lenya Competition in 2008, and she has performed Weill's work often, most notably on a CD entitled *Weill Variations*. Her latest recording, *Portraying Passion*, begins with that poisonous delicacy by Weill—to a text by Brecht—*Die sieben Todsünden*. Many of us grew up hearing the renditions of Lotte Lenya or Gisela May; in recent decades, the work has become a specialty of operatic sopranos or mezzos with dramatic flair (e.g., Brigitte Fassbaender or Anne Sofie von Otter), who tend to sing the work in its original keys, not the downward transposition used by Lenya in her later years. By training and background, Augestad falls somewhere between the Lenya/May camp and the von Otter/Fassbaender camp. In the abstract, that should make her a near-ideal interpreter. In practice, her performance is a little wearisome. Augestad's upper register is often "white" (i.e., stripped of vibrato) and cuts like a knife, and her lower register is weak and breathy. If her vocal limitations were counterbalanced by a more adventurous delivery of the text, I would have felt more drawn in. But an attitude of reserve and careful correctness prevails. The male quartet is often rough and unsteady in tone, making Weill's keenly chosen chords hard to discern, particularly in a *cappella* passages.

The English-language booklet essay suffers at times from unidiomatic word choices, and some of the information given is misleading. Most notably, the *Todsünden* is described in terms of one particular staging (where the protagonist blackmails various married couples, a circus horse is beaten, etc.). The essay presents this scenario without comment, as if it were essential to any live performance. In fact, it is simply what was worked out by the production team for the Paris premiere. Weill and Brecht's conception of the *Sins* prescribes no particular visual realization; the work can be handled any number of ways on stage or it can be sung as a concert piece, with minimal movement or none at all. The booklet presents Auden and Kallman's translation of Brecht's text, which offers some witty and imaginative equivalents: "eine kleine Fabrik" (a small factory) becomes "a Texas motel." But as a guide to the meaning of the words that Weill set, it is unreliable.

Back to Augestad, who proves that she *can* do marvelous things in the next work on the recording, *Hate Songs*, a wonderfully nasty six-movement song cycle composed for her by the Norwegian-born composer Marcus Paus. *Hate Songs*, settings of acidic verses by Dorothy Parker, proved to be one of the most engaging vocal works that I have heard in recent years. It uses a chamber orchestra and includes many prominent passages



for one or several woodwinds or, echoing jazz performance, solo double-bass. The cycle expresses Parker's favorite theme: how awful human beings are, especially the male of the species. Augestad makes apt and varied uses of her various registers. She can croon a bit like Barbra Streisand on high notes, and she slams into her thin low tones for comical effect, as when repeatedly protesting (too much?) that she absolutely hates men.

My favorite movement is the third, which contrasts "the Cave Men" ("They slap people on the back") and "the Sensitive Souls" ("The wrong shade of purple / Gives them a nervous breakdown"). For this movement, Paus draws, discreetly, on familiar styles and orchestral devices. The passage about the Cave Men is preceded and supported by bass-clarinet figures that evoke *Le sacre du printemps* (that ultimate musical portrayal of a primitive society). And the lines about the Sensitive Souls call up a quasi-Middle Eastern style, as if a wilting guy who "look[s] at a woman languorously, / through half-closed eyes" is the reverse-gender equivalent of a sultan's concubine.

The CD concludes with two works by Charles Ives. Augestad performs a set of five songs in the version that John Adams orchestrated for Dawn Upshaw. We close with *The Unanswered Question* (final version), where the role of the voice is, we might say, taken by a solo trumpet. The marvelous soloist is Brynjar Kolbergstrud.

In the Weill, the Oslo Philharmonic is led with seductive flair by Joshua Weilerstein. But it sometimes sounds recessed, perhaps in order to allow Augestad to be heard clearly. Weilerstein likewise conducts *The Unanswered Question* with great sensitivity. The equally alert conductor for the Paus and the Ives/Adams is Christian Eggen.

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Portraying Passion was named February's Recording of the Month by *Opernwelt* magazine, which described it as "simply captivating."