

Building *Mahagonny*: Some Guidelines

Every production of *Mahagonny* must grapple with not only the customary issues of production and casting but also with decisions about the content and structure of the piece itself. What follows is an attempt to outline the issues that need to be addressed by the director and conductor of any production. Because *Mahagonny* comprises a series of “self-contained musical numbers,” as Weill described them, the composite is a “loose” form, one which demands that informed choices be made about the content and dramaturgy of the work, according to the options outlined below.

In a letter to conductor Maurice Abravanel dated 2 February 1930, Weill himself articulated the governing principle: “*Mahagonny* is an opera. An opera for singers. To cast it with actors is absolutely impossible. Only when I specifically have marked passages as ‘spoken’ should there be any spoken words and changes of any kind are possible only with my explicit permission.”

1. **Opera vs. Songspiel:** *Mahagonny* can be performed in only two authorized versions:

a. *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel* (1927) for four men, two women, and ten instrumentalists; no spoken dialogue, c. 25 minutes. b. *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, a 3-act opera for a large cast of singers and full orchestra. Weill and Brecht incorporated into the opera some numbers from the *Songspiel*, but in all cases Weill recomposed, adapted, or refunctioned them for the new, larger forces, and for the new characters and placements. For example, in the *Songspiel* the “Alabama Song” is a duet for Jessie and Bessie, and it comprises three strophes (“whisky bar,” “pretty boy,” “little dollar”), with a solo for each singer and then a canonic duet. But in the opera it is sung by Jenny and the girls, and it comprises only two strophes, the second featuring a melismatic descant for Jenny. For the opera Weill recomposed the number, and he did not make a setting of the “pretty boy” stanza. Singing it to the same music as the first stanza is repetitive and counter to Weill’s practice. “Benares Song” and “Gott in Mahagonny” have no definitive dramaturgical placement or plot function in the opera, as they do in the *Songspiel*. Thus each production must decide anew the question of their inclusion and placement in Act III. The solutions proposed by David Drew in his 1969 edition seem the most apt. Authorization for departures from this sequencing should be requested in advance from the publisher.

2. **Weill vs. Brecht:** Only rarely has a composer of opera or musical theater recruited as his librettist a poet/playwright of Brecht’s genius, stature, and influence. Weill and Brecht collaborated almost daily for three full months on the libretto, whose total plan and scenario, Weill claimed, “was worked out together in all details, word for word, according to musical considerations.” But even before its premiere in Leipzig in March 1930, Brecht had lost interest in the work. Now dismissing the opera as “culinary” in that “everything is washed out by the music,” he virtually abandoned the joint enterprise. Instead he unilaterally published, as he also did for *Die Dreigroschenoper*, a revised “literary” version of *Aufstieg* in his *Versuche 2* (1930), which diverged so widely from the stage version composed by Weill that this text is incompatible with the work as published by Universal Edition. At the same time Brecht wrote with Peter Suhrkamp his “Notes to *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” again articulating aesthetic views in general and an interpretation of the piece in particular antithetical to Weill’s. This literary version of the text was not intended for performance with Weill’s music, and Brecht’s commentary on the opera must be read not as “descriptive” of the joint work but as his post facto “corrective” intended to influence the reception of the piece. The only authorized text for stage performances, then, is the one Weill set to music, as transmitted in the materials issued by Universal Edition.

3. **Versions and Revisions:** *Mahagonny* underwent revision after the piano-vocal score and libretto were published by Universal Edition, sometime before the Leipzig premiere, largely in response to concerns raised by prospective producers about censorship of certain scenes. The most substantive

alteration, for No. 14 "Lieben," prompted Weill to write the "Cranes Duet" as a temporary replacement for part of the original "Mandelay" bordello scene in Act II. But already in the 1931 Berlin production, the scene could be performed as originally conceived, and thus the "Cranes Duet" was omitted from that production. With no possibility for further performances in Central Europe, plans to publish a revised vocal score were abandoned; thus, there is no definitive placement for the duet, if it is included. When the brothel scene is performed as originally intended, the "Cranes Duet" may seem an odd appendage or interruption to that scene. In his 1969 edition of the opera, David Drew placed the duet in Act III as an alternative for the melodrama of Jim and Jenny in No. 19, "Hast du nicht sogar ein weißes Kleid..." But, as Drew readily admits, this location is not unproblematic. Yet another alternative is to interpolate it in Act I, between No. 7 and No. 8, as a snapshot within the progression of Jenny and Jim's relationship. Interpolating the piece here requires no modification to the preceding or consequent contexts.

For the Berlin production in 1931, Weill also wrote an alternate version of "Ach, bedenken Sie, Herr Jack O'Brien." Thus productions today have a choice between the original "neo-classical" version in No. 5 and the "song-like" setting printed in the appendix of the piano-vocal score. Each has its merits; the original more closely parallels the musical idiom of the "Cranes Duet."

4. Act Breaks/Intermission: Originally Weill conceived No. 17, Jimmy's big aria, "Nur die Nacht," as the conclusion to Act II. Already in the second production, however, the aria migrated to the beginning of Act III, and Weill wrote a new chorale setting to end Act II. Both possibilities are defensible. If there is no intermission at this point in the evening, the original conclusion to No. 16, which leads directly into Nr. 17, is probably preferable. Both options are included in the rental materials, though only the "Lasst euch nicht verführen" ending appears in the 1969 piano-vocal score (the passage was orchestrated posthumously by Leonard Hancock). The question of number and placement of intermission(s) is anything but trivial. Uncut, Act I lasts no more than 65 minutes; Act II only 40 minutes (without either the "Cranes Duet" or No. 17); Act III is only slightly longer even if both are included there. Thus the number and placement of intermission(s) may be the determining factor in the choice of conclusion for No. 16 and the function of No. 17.

5. Cuts: Without any cuts, *Mahagonny* lasts no more than 2 ½ hours, not including intermission(s). All of the cuts that were implemented by productions during Weill's lifetime have been documented and notated with "Vi--de" in Drew's piano-vocal score. Most of these cuts make little sense. As a general rule, sections that are strophic in structure (cf. "Alabama Song," "Auf nach Mahagonny," "Denn wie man sich bettet") contain multiple stanzas for good dramaturgical reasons, and Weill has built variety and momentum into these multi-stanza settings. Decisions concerning these "Vi--de" cuts should take into account not only characterization and plot ramifications, but also musical and formal ones.

6. String Section: In Weill's holograph full score of the opera, next to the names of the string instruments, he wrote the numerals, respectively, 6 – 3 – 2 – 2 for violin, viola, cello, and bass. It is not clear whether the numbers were intended to be a minimum count, nor even if the numbers refer to players or to desks (and therefore must be doubled). Maurice Abravanel, who conducted the second production in 1930, in Kassel, recalled that he utilized, with Weill's full approval, the entire string section available in his opera house. Although the scoring of certain passages might seem consistent with a reduced string section, that of many others requires a substantial string component, whatever the acoustic conditions. Even though the violin part is not divided into Violin I and II, conductors in most medium to large-capacity opera houses have usually opted for a full-size string section with excellent balance within the orchestra and between stage and pit.

7. **Recordings:** There are no audio recordings of *Aufstieg* that can be recommended without significant reservations. Although Lenya's from the 1950s carries tremendous interpretative authority, by then her range had been so compromised that the role of Jenny was virtually rewritten by the conductor, without comment, to accommodate her vocal disabilities. She later admitted to regretting that the work had been misrepresented by that endeavor, so crucial in the reception history of the piece. After hearing Teresa Stratas sing the role at the Metropolitan Opera in 1979, she anointed her as her "dream Jenny." The posthumous accommodations made for Lenya to sing the role on a recording (she never sang it on stage after 1933) are not authorized for performance.

8. **Casting:** As Weill stated explicitly, *Mahagonny* is an opera for singers. The five principals in particular, Jenny, Jimmy, Begbick, Moses, Fatty, require operatic performers at the peak of their abilities. Rewriting any role in *Mahagonny* to accommodate vocal deficits is forbidden, including transposition of musical numbers.

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