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The Art of Lotte Lenya

WEILL

The Threepenny Opera

Moritat and Barbara-Song

Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny

Alabama-Song

Happy-End

Bilbao-Song

Lotte Lenya, soprano

Orchestra conducted by Roger Bean

The Threepenny Opera—Moritat and Barbara-Song

The première of *The Threepenny Opera* in Berlin on August 31st, 1928 was one of the great events in the history of modern theatre. The work enjoyed a huge public success throughout the world, and established a form of musical theatre which continued to influence other composers and writers even after the Nazis banned all the works of Weill and Brecht (Weill's collaborator).

The Threepenny Opera shows how in an unjust society the strong and ruthless will profit by the misfortunes of the weak, and how lawlessness will find its own legal justification. This lesson—so unwelcome to Hitler's Germany—is implied by the character of Mackie Messer (Mack the Knife) whose exploits are first described in the famous *Moritat*. This song is sung by a street-singer at the beginning of the play. A man lies dead in the Strand, some rich men disappear, Jenny Towler is knifed in dock-land, there is a fire in Soho, a widow is raped. . . each time Mack is not far from the scene of the crime. The tune is impassive but all-knowing. So much knowledge is dangerous. Are we not a little frightened?

The *Moritat* is an impersonal chronicle, whereas the *Barbara-Song* is a personal confession. In the first verse-and-refrain the singer tells of her former belief in female virtue, and in the next stanza describes how her dreams of a handsome suitor were realised, though her principles led her to say "no" to him. But one day, runs the third stanza, a man came who was not handsome or respectable. He did not wait for her to say "no". And so, with a kind of dignified despair, she accepts her defeat.

Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny—Alabama-Song

The opera *Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny* (1930) is the most ambitious of the eight works on which Brecht and Weill collaborated. The music for one of the leading roles, that of Jenny, is set in violent contrast by being strictly non-operatic. This is emphasised by the fact that Jenny's first solo, the *Alabama-Song*, is sung in English even in the original German libretto. Jenny is

"foreign" to everything—she is the complete nihilist. As she sings this song, she and her companions are making their way to Mahagonny, the "City of Nets". Mahagonny has been founded as a false paradise for the discontented. There, in the pursuit of worthless pleasures, they will discover their own private hells. The *Alabama-Song* precedes the tragic events of the opera, but in its contrast of moon-struck nostalgia and vicious declamation it already contains a prophesy.

Happy-End—Bilbao-Song

Happy End was an indirect sequel to *The Threepenny Opera*, and survives today (in several recent productions) chiefly on account of its masterly score. The *Bilbao-Song* is a half-humorous half-wistful cameo, in Brecht's Kiplingesque manner. The singer tells of a broken-down old Dance Hall which, for all its shabbiness, seemed the most beautiful in the world. She recalls the tune which used to be played on a tinny piano. But in the third verse we learn that the Dance Hall has been renovated. It has lost its charm. And as if overcome by some unspoken memory, the singer can no longer remember the text of the tune.

David Drew

Lotte Lenya was born in Vienna and was attracted to the theatre from a very early age. In 1927 her husband Kurt Weill and the distinguished dramatist Bertold Brecht began their collaboration and made Lenya the first exponent of their new "Song-style". After her outstandingly successful appearance in the first production of *The Threepenny Opera* she played leading roles in works by such prominent figures as Wedekind, Feuchtwanger and Brecht. She also played her role of Jenny in Pabst's classic film of *The Threepenny Opera*. After several widely-hailed appearances in Paris (following Hitler's accession to power) she accompanied her husband to the United States. There she lived a life of semi-retirement until 1952—two years after Weill's tragically early death—when she was persuaded to play Jenny in a concert-performance of *The Threepenny Opera* conducted by Bernstein. This led to the famous New York production and to Lenya's overnight return to fame. Since that time she has made numerous concert, stage and television appearances in Europe and the U.S.A., and has supervised and sung in major recordings of Weill works (including the complete *The Threepenny Opera*, the *Opera Mahagonny*, and *The Seven Deadly Sins*).