

KURT WEILL : AN INTRODUCTION

Weill began to show an interest in composition during his 12th year, and by 1915 the evidence of a creative bent was such that his father sought the advice of Albert Bing, a pupil of Pfitzner, recently appointed first Kapellmeister at the Hofoper. Bing was so impressed by the boy's gifts that he undertook to teach him himself. For three years Bing and his wife, daughter of the distinguished expressionist playwright Carl Sternheim, provided Weill with what almost amounted to a second home; and later Bing also found him work as a coach at the Hofoper.

In April 1918 Weill went to Berlin at Bing's suggestion, and enrolled as a student at the Hochschule für Musik, under Humperdinck (composition), Friedrich Koch (counterpoint) and Rudolf Krasselt (conducting). Partly for financial reasons but chiefly because he found the musical climate at the Hochschule somewhat stifling, he left after the summer term of 1919.

He approached Busoni, who had just been invited by the Prussian Academy of Arts to direct a master class for young composers of proven ability and outstanding promise. Weill was duly accepted, and remained a member of the class for three years.

Shortly after leaving the master class in December 1923, Weill was introduced to the leading expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser, and began a creative association that was to remain close until Weill left Germany nearly ten years later. The première, under Fritz Busch, of the Weill-Kaiser opera *Der Protagonist* in Dresden in 1926 made Weill's name known beyond specialist circles and was hailed by Oskar Bie and others as the first genuine operatic success achieved by a German composer of the postwar generation. An early result was a commission for a short chamber opera from Hindemith's newly established organization, Deutsche Kammermusik Baden-Baden. Weill considered several classical texts, but being at that time on the threshold of his collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, eventually decided on a setting of the *Mahagonny-Gesänge* from Brecht's recent verse collection *Die Hauspostille*. Presented with great success as a 'Songspiel', *Mahagonny* prepared the way for the later opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, and laid the foundations of a collaboration which, although it lasted no more than three years, can be numbered among the most notable in 20th-century music. It did not, however, interrupt or undermine the earlier collaboration with Kaiser, who was much esteemed by Brecht, as Brecht was by him. Early in 1928 a short *opera buffa* by Weill and Kaiser, *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*, was launched on its highly successful career, and a few months later Weill's and Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* had its historic première in Berlin, with the part of Jenny played by Weill's wife Lotte Lenya, whom he had married in 1926.

From the time of *Der Protagonist* until that of his emigration, Weill's reputation in Germany seemed firmly established: by all but the post-Pfitzner faction he was acknowledged to be the most gifted German composer after Hindemith, though with a much surer sense of theatre. A similar view had been taken in modern music circles abroad, notably in France (by Prunières and others) and in Italy (where Malipiero was among his senior admirers). But having concentrated on works for the German stage and paid little attention to audiences or to practical requirements in less privileged musical cultures, he found himself at a grave disadvantage when forced to leave his native country. After the succession of failures in France and England in 1933-5, and his total exclusion from the musical life of Germany, he was already almost a forgotten man in Europe when World War II began. Although postwar German productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* under the aegis of the occupation authorities enjoyed some success, as did a German

adaptation of *Knickerbocker Holiday* stressing the Hitlerian aspects of its comic villain, there was no sign in Germany of any renewed interest in Weill the musician by the time of his death, and most of the obituaries were guarded. Meanwhile the USA had remained in almost complete ignorance of his European works, none of which had been professionally performed there during the 15 years of his residence.

Thanks largely to the efforts of his widow, Lotte Lenya, some amends were made on both sides of the Atlantic during the subsequent decade, and there was talk of a Weill renaissance. But despite the pleas of enthusiasts in Europe and the USA, some of whom felt that even at the height of his fame Weill had been under-estimated, the musical world remained sceptical, partly because of the emphasis that was now laid on his collaboration with Brecht, and partly because of a suspicion that no composer who devoted the last years of his life to writing Broadway shows deserved, or could even have wished, to be taken seriously.

A quarter of a century after Weill's death there was still widespread ignorance of his work apart from *Die Dreigroschenoper* – which had long since established itself as a 20th-century classic – coupled with a seemingly unbridgeable division of opinion. Whatever the final verdict (if such a thing is conceivable in Weill's controversial case) it is certain that none can be fairly reached until an attempt is made to view his work as a whole, and not just in the few parts which have attracted attention, often for reasons that have little to do with music.

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„Eine der köstlichsten Buffo - Opern der neuen Zeit“
(Alfred Baresel)

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Opera buffa in einem Akt
Text von Georg Kaiser

MUSIK VON

KURT WEILL

Uraufführung unter Leitung von Gustav Brecher und Walter Brüggemann am Neuen Theater in Leipzig am 18. Februar 1928

AUS DER PRESSE:

- „Weill wird mit dem Zaren sein Glück machen ... nach Kfeneks
„Jonny“ ein neues Erfolgstück der modernen Oper.“
(Berliner Tageblatt, Karl Westermeyer)
- „Ein geschlossener musikalischer Organismus.“
(Berliner Börsen-Courier, Heinrich Strobel)
- „Allerbester Komödienstil in dieser Partitur.“
(Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Walter Schrenk)
- „Ein köstlicher Groteskostoff.“ (Berliner Morgenpost, Rudolf Kastner)
- „Ein überaus wirkungsvolles, witziges und unterhaltendes Stück.“
(Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten, Adolf Aber)
- „Tango Angèle: Künstlerisch geformter Zeitgeist. Die populäre Wirkung des Stückes ist nicht abzusehen. Jeder wird sich diese Platte kaufen.“
(Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung)

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