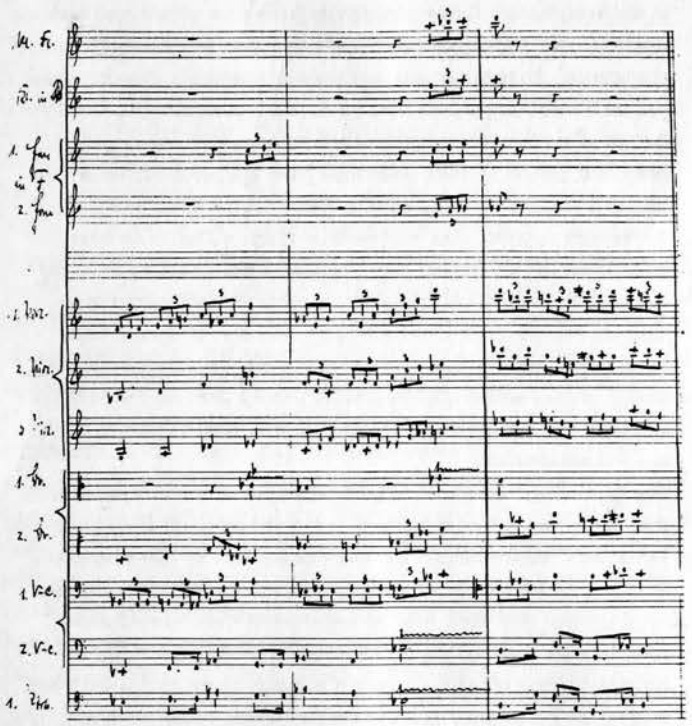


Weill Archive

Symphony No 1 : Weill's first draft of the opening *allegro vivace*

Symphony No 1

Introductory and analytical notes by David Drew

The symphony was composed in Berlin in April-June 1921. Although Weill never released it for public performance, he did not underrate its importance; as late as 1932 he included it among the representative works of his early years. The score was lost in 1933, but came to light twenty-five years later. The first performance was given in 1957 by the NWDR Symphony Orchestra (Hamburg), under Wilhelm Schüchter. A study score was published in 1968 by B. Schott's Söhne (Mainz).

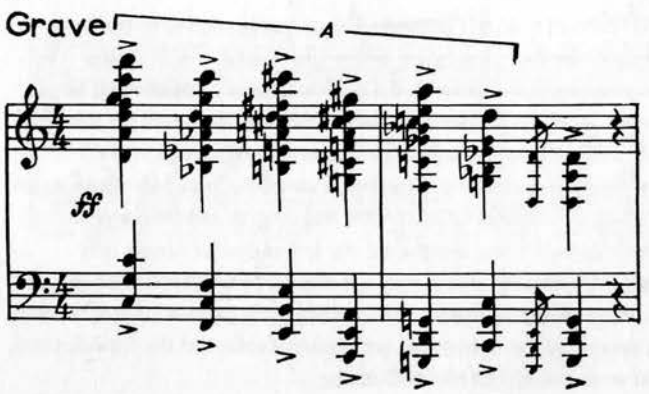
The autograph score's title page – destroyed by well-wishers who hid the autograph during the Second World War – bore a pacifist-socialist epigraph taken from Johannes R Becher's *Festspiel*, 'Workers, Peasants and Soldiers – A People's Awakening to God' (1921). Written in an extreme expressionist idiom derived from Strindberg's religious dramas, the *Festspiel* gives a stylized picture of a world war and its revolutionary aftermath. While the symphony is in no sense a formal counterpart to the *Festspiel*, it clearly relates to Becher's preoccupations at that time. (Three years later Becher completely re-wrote the play; the religious message was excluded, and the social one re-interpreted in orthodox communist terms, rather than the romantically left-wing socialist ones of the original version.)

Although Weill was a member of Busoni's masterclass at the time of composing the symphony, neither he nor the other members of the class were 'pupils' in the normal sense. Busoni did not give formal composition lessons – which were never the intended object of the class – but imparted his views in the course of discussions of the classics (notably Bach and Mozart) and of the works submitted to him. While he allowed his pupils, or disciples as he preferred to call them, complete freedom as to their manner of composition, he did not disguise his own preferences and dislikes. The latter must certainly have influenced his unfavourable verdict on Weill's symphony, whose Mahlerian and Straussian rhetoric, with the hyperboles and purple patches that go with it, represented almost everything against which Busoni had set his face. Weill had been nurtured on Wagner and the late romantics, and by 1920, if not earlier, had discovered, and been thrilled by, the music of Schoenberg – from which, by this time, Busoni was thoroughly estranged. It is significant that the only ideas in Weill's symphony that met with his master's approval were the (neo-classical) fugal and chorale ones – which today may strike us as the least felicitous in the work.

Like Schoenberg's Op 9 **Kammersymphonie**, to which it is plainly indebted (just as the earlier Rilke tone-poem was apparently indebted to Schoenberg's **Pelleas und Melisande**), the symphony is in one movement, and is based, melodically and harmonically, on the interval of the fourth. Like the 1916 **Kammersymphonie** (also in one movement) by Franz Schreker – with whom Weill had once considered studying – it owes much of its rich sonority to the extremely elaborate *divisi* string writing. Although there are passages of chamber-orchestral, even chamber-musical, character, it is not by any means a chamber symphony. It requires a large body of strings, together with a moderate complement of wind, brass and percussion.

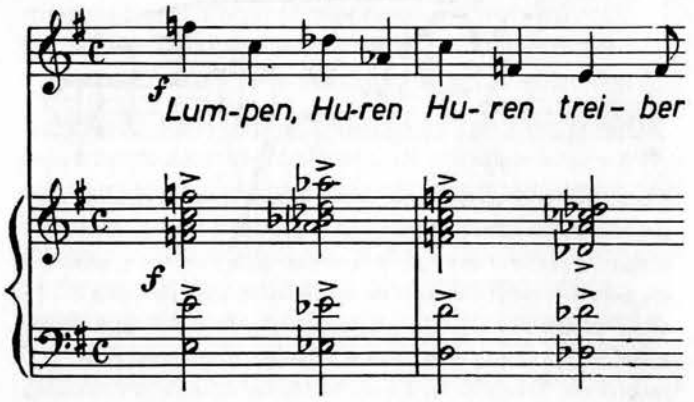
The thirty-bar introduction juxtaposes four distinct statements. The first of them is one of the work's two cyclic themes, and begins thus:

Ex 1



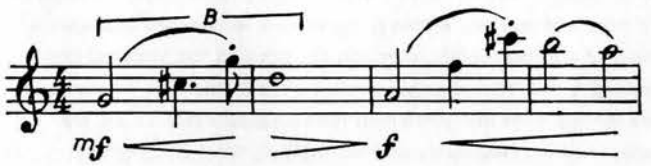
The melodic pattern of falling fourths and fifths (motive A) is almost a Weillian *ur-Motiv*. It occurs at decisive moments in many of his mature works, the most famous example being Macheath's enraged farewell to the world in **The Threepenny Opera**:

Ex 2



The second of the introduction's statements is a polyphonic answer to, or rather, explosion of, the first's massive block chords. It is cut short by a declamatory violin phrase – *leaping* fourths, this time – which leads to the third statement and the second of the two cyclic ideas:

Ex 3

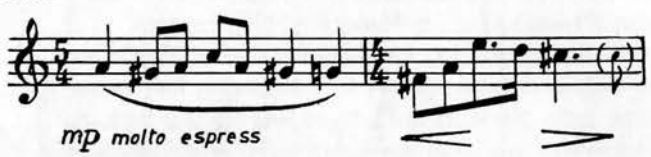


(The idea owes something to the one that initiates the second-subject stage in Schoenberg's Op 9 **Kammersymphonie**, and in turn prefigures one in Hindemith's Op 36 No 3, and another in Weill's own **Mahagonny**). After a varied repeat of the opening statement, the introduction closes with a lyrical codetta whose melody inverts motive A. That relationship by inversion, together with the marked contrast of musical character, suggests the 'war-and-peace' antinomy that underlies the main structure of the symphony. The structure divides into three main spans, each with many subsections.

Span 1 begins with an *allegro vivace* marked *'wild, heftig'* (wild, violent). If its march-material suggests the mechanized armies of modern times, the galloping rhythms and shrill whinnyings that go with it seem to anticipate the apocalyptic horsemen evoked in the finale of Weill's **Die Bürgschaft**. Greatly speeded-up versions of both the cyclic motives contribute to the tumult.

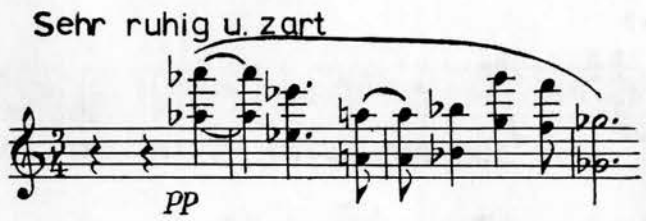
An outwardly quieter though inwardly no more peaceful mood is suggested by a new idea (**Ex 4**) – initially for solo clarinet and viola – which, in the context of the foregoing material, has something of the character traditionally associated with the initiation of the second-subject stage in a sonata movement:

Ex 4



However, this impression is dispelled by what follows. The irregular metres resolve into 3/4 time, the pace gradually slackens and the flutes and strings steal in with this memorably poignant phrase:

Ex 5

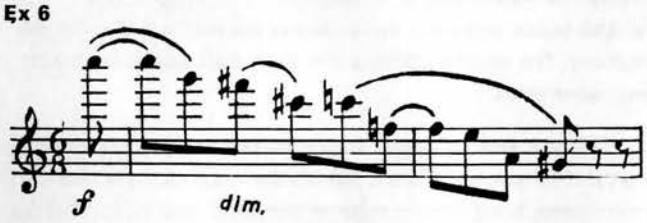


It is all the more poignant for being, in fact, a transformation (by augmentation) of one of the vicious-sounding motives from the *allegro vivace*. But this 'soft and tender' (*ruhig und zart*) answer to the battle-music is cut short by the return of the Exx 1 and 2 music in reverse order. The juggernaut-chords of Ex 1 provoke a massive gesture of protest which, after five bars, subsides in resignation. Then follows a sustained lyrical episode which seems to express a state of complete spiritual withdrawal.

This episode, which marks the centre of Span 1 and replaces a conventional development section, is in two parts. In the first, a string 'concertino' gropes towards the tonal light while seemingly disembodied horn phrases (4/4 against the basic 3/8) echo the previous protest and dimly foreshadow the affirmative chorale theme that still lies far ahead. The second part of the episode, in 6/8 time and marked *'anmutig'* (graceful), is, we may suppose, a vision of a better world. Although the sunny E flat major of the opening is the relative major of the work's home-key, it sounds very remote from that embattled home. Equally remote are the gently-walking bass-lines and the melodic hints of an almost idyllic *Ländler*. One is reminded of a moment in Becher's play where, amid the clamour of war, a lone woman speaks, or rather whispers, of the day when the 'May trees of peace and longing' will be planted in place of the torn-down field-altars.

All this is still a dream. The return to reality is heralded by the violins' suddenly-painful reminder (**Ex 6**) of motive A:

Ex 6

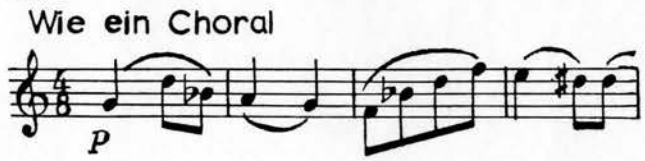


The ensuing attempt to re-affirm the 'ideal' vision is swiftly crushed by a tutti that leads back into the battlefield of the *allegro vivace*. After a reinforced version of the 'protest' music and a second retreat into the penumbra of the string 'concertino', Span 2 ends with a brief reminiscence of the 6/8 *'vision'*, which is to be developed in the central section of Span 2.

Span 2 is in triple time throughout, and is marked *andante religioso*. The main theme (introduced by the cellos) is accompanied by a solo clarinet melody which distantly anticipates the mood of Marie's lullaby in **Wozzeck** (1923). The mood is not specifically religious, and the lullaby is subject to interruptions from the outside world (motive A, in diminution, then motive B, climactically). The voice that is heard here seems to be that of pleading man, or woman, rather than that of God. The actual discovery of God is reserved for the next and last span.

Span 3 begins, on the lower strings, with a neo-classical theme that is related to nothing that has gone before apart from the groping string-music in the *allegro vivace*'s 'concertino' section. The theme, which might be said to represent 'man without God', peters out, and is abruptly followed by a chorale for wind and brass. The opening of the chorale theme –

Ex 7



– is, in its first phrase, a re-formulation of that disembodied horn figure from the 'concertino' passage, and in its answering phrase, an augmented development of a motive from the 'neo-classical' prelude. The sentence formed by the two phrases may also be regarded as a Lisztian (or Franckian) transformation of Ex 4. (Oddly enough, there is also an anticipation of one of the most famous of Weill's Berlin theatre songs.)

The chorale comes to a tonally firm close, but has no immediate consequence. Ignoring what has happened, the lower strings resume their earth-bound neo-classicisms, this time in fugal texture and at greater length. A sense of desperate effort is suggested by the *marcatissimo* climax: but the effort – without God? – is fruitless, and again the music peters out. As if in response to that failure, the chorale returns *forte* and on the full orchestra, with added counterpoints derived from the fugal material. The same affirmative cadence is reached, but this time with strikingly different results: the wind instruments begin with a tonally disorientated phrase that relates to the 'wedge' shape of the fugue subject, but turn – 'in fear', as one expression mark suggests – towards the spiritual world of the chorale. The strings then join forces with the wind and brass. Their upward-striving phrases – recognizing, at last, an affinity between the chorale and the tentative phrases that preceded it, and re-interpreting that affinity in terms of the work's characteristic fourth-chord structures – lead to a 'mystical' revelation. Beginning with the 'quiet and tender' music of Ex 5, two solo violins soar into the astral heights. (An analogous passage in Weill's 1920 cello sonata is marked *'ganz verklärt'*, 'wholly transfigured'.)

The solo violins' dialogue continues throughout the subsequent, and very beautiful, passage in which the chorale theme is heard for the last time, as a *cantus firmus* bass (trombone and lower strings). The episode ends as if in an attitude of rapt contemplation.

If this is the moment where 'a People' discovers not only God but also a sense of God's love, the subsequent summons – four bars, *marcato*, for wind and brass, balancing the similar interjection that preceded the 'transfiguration' episode – calls them back to the world of Man. The summons ends Span 3, and leads – *'mit begeisterten Aufschwung'*, 'with enthusiastic impetus' – into an Epilogue that re-interprets the two cyclic motives, and combines them with similarly transformed motives from the *allegro vivace*. The climax is reached with the return of the Ex 1 music, purged of its harsh quartal harmony, re-harmonized in parallel common chords, and cadencing in C major.

Brief though it is, this gigantic tutti is surely related to the final scene of Becher's *Festspiel*, where the 'People', with God's blessing, advance towards the promised land of peace and social justice. At the point where celesta and bells are heard for the first and only time in the work, Weill adds the expression mark *'Jubelnd'*, 'in jubilation'. That was indeed the mood in which most of mankind had hailed the end of the First World War, and in which part of it had welcomed the fall of Tsarist Russia and Imperial Germany. But it was not the mood in which Weill leaves us. With an extraordinary and characteristic gesture of renunciation, he returns to the contemplative closing section of the Introduction, and ends the symphony in C *minor*.

In the symphony's C minor cadence there is an unresolved tension which is only emphasized by Weill's contradictory marking, 'with confidence'. Philosophically, and indeed artistically, the composer has set himself some problems he cannot yet cope with, and others that he was soon to recognize were not truly his. Although, for Weill, the 'reformist' third span may have suggested some affinity with the finale of Mendelssohn's 'Reformation' symphony, for us it may well suggest – as the previous spans do not – an over-reliance on literary inspiration. The span's discontinuity in its early stages is deliberate, but the effect is programmatic rather than musical. Weill's instinctive musicality, and his technique, were inseparable from his convictions; and there is an element in his chosen theme which did not wholly accord with his deepest convictions. It is not the existence of God that seems to be in doubt, but His accessibility.

The God whose existence is acknowledged in the orchestral work that followed the first symphony is the vengeful Jehovah of the Old Testament. Astonishingly, the work bears the title **'Divertimento'.** Its choral finale expresses, with great contrapuntal virtuosity, the religious *fear* that Weill tried to suppress in the first symphony. Like the third span of the symphony, the finale is indebted to chorale prelude procedures; but it is much closer to the Bachian models, and is entirely without the symphony's late-romantic connotations. The chorale melody (Weill's own, though of Lutheran character) is sung to the words of a prayer that God may temper justice with mercy, restrain his righteous anger at mankind's sinfulness, and release the world from the threat of total destruction – 'I and all of us' – even though Man has deserved no less a punishment. Yet there is nothing in the music to suggest that mankind will in fact be spared. There could hardly be a stronger contrast to the 'message' of the first symphony (if not to the implications of its closing bars).

In his next orchestral work, the **Fantasia, Passacaglia und Hymnus,** Weill clearly intended to re-affirm – on the same large scale, but with increased complexity and consistency – something of what he had said in the first symphony. Although the enormous passacaglia is, like the finale of the **Divertimento,** a cry *de profundis*, the **Hymnus** – a fugal movement – recalls the jubilation of the symphony's final tutti. The **Hymnus** is related to a previous setting or a Rilke poem which begins 'I'll praise Him, I'll uplift those cries of mine like the trumpets going before an army.' The closing lines of the poem seem to have acquired, for Weill, a personal significance: 'For in my growing voice there has been a division into a crying and a fragrantness: the one would make provision for Him who is far-off, the other must continue as the vision and bliss and angel of my loneliness.'

That division is fundamental to almost all Weill's mature works, including those he wrote with the professedly atheistic Brecht. But the 'growing voice', as it grew, began to require other media than that of the classical or romantic orchestra. After the **Concerto** for Violin and Wind Orchestra (1924), all the works Weill wrote for the concert hall in the 1920s were vocal or choral. In 1929, and again a year later, he made sketches for orchestral works, but discarded them. Although several of his admirers, including the late Erwin Stein, urged him to return to the field of absolute music, he was not yet sure of his path. The rigorous process of simplifying his means of expression, which had begun shortly before he met Brecht and which had culminated in the composition of the school-opera **Der Jasager,** excluded the possibility of any return to the manner of his orchestral works of the 1920s. However, the stage works that followed **Der Jasager** were, whether or not he was conscious of it, a preparation for his orchestral masterpiece. A sense that he had now reached a critical stage in his own career, enabled him to turn to his own artistic advantage a commission whose original object was almost certainly a work in the manner of his collaborations with Brecht.

Weill's second symphony, his last orchestral work, was the result of a commission from that renowned patroness of modern music, the Princess Edmond de Polignac – to whose generosity we owe such works as Stravinsky's **Renard,** Falla's **Master Peter's Puppet Show** and Satie's **Socrate.** The first sketches were made in Berlin in January and February 1933. Progress was interrupted first by the composer's enforced emigration from Germany in March, and then by the need to fulfil, at short notice, a new commission – for the ballet **The Seven Deadly Sins.** Composition of the symphony was resumed in the late summer of 1933, and completed, in the village of Louveciennes near Paris, in February 1934. The first performance was given by the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra under Bruno Walter in October of the same year. Partly owing to the unfavourable press reactions, and partly owing to the worsening conditions in the Europe of the late 1930s, the work remained in manuscript and was soon forgotten. The first edition – a study score – was published in 1966 conjointly by B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz and Heugel et Cie, Paris.