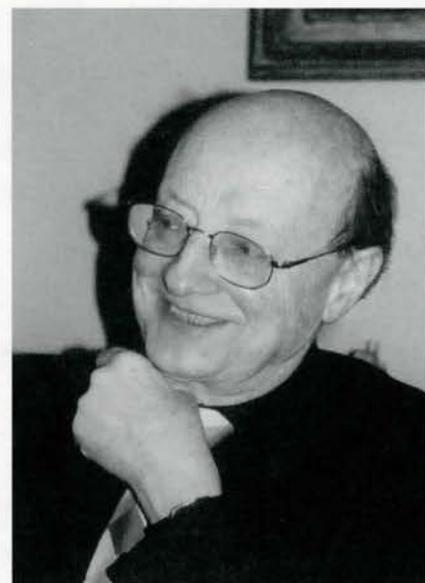


Nach einem halben Jahrhundert . . . Fifty Years of Working on Kurt Weill

Few readers of this Newsletter will need an introduction to David Drew – British writer, editor, music publisher, and recording producer. Half a century has passed since he began to explore, research, and edit the life and works of Kurt Weill. A list restricted to his most important publications would be too long to reprint here, so a few titles will have to suffice: *Kurt Weill: Ausgewählte Schriften* and *Über Kurt Weill* (both Suhrkamp, 1975) and the indispensable *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (Faber, 1987) have appeared in book form. Drew authored the Weill entries in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980 and 2001) and published numerous articles, most recently on Weill's *Royal Palace* (in *Words on Music: Essays in Honor of Andrew Porter on the Occasion of his 75th Birthday*, Pendragon Press, 2003). He is an Editorial Board member of the *Kurt Weill Edition* and a recipient of the Kurt Weill Distinguished Achievement Award (1996). Many festivals and recording projects owe their existence to his efforts. Last but by no means least, he was a close associate of Lenya's during the last 25 years of her life. We invited David Drew to reflect on his long association with Weill; the interview coincided with his own 75th birthday.



David Drew, Spring 2005. Photo: Dmitri Smirnov

After half a century working on Kurt Weill, where do you see changes of attitude towards him and his music, and how do you explain them?

From the window beside my desk in South West London, I don't see any such changes, and that worries me. What I see is a large cherry tree that seems to have grown overnight from a sapling, two small apartment blocks where the old terrace houses were 'blitzed' in 1941, and a patch of stubbly grass that's used as a playground by a whole assortment of kids. Although their parents or grandparents hail from many lands, the music they play on summer evenings isn't by Weill. For that, there is of course an explanation.

But a simpler way of finding the answer to your question about attitude would be to turn to our national dailies—Rupert Murdoch's *Times*, for instance. Last December, *The Times's* opera critic, John Allison, published a rave review—surely well deserved—of the Opera North production of *One Touch of Venus*. He began, however, with a pun on "Speak Low" and a claim that "highbrow musicologists still pretend that Weill, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was talking down and even selling out to Broadway audiences— . . ."

Who is publishing musicology of that sort in the UK these days?

Not the present editor of *Opera*, anyway.

That would be John Allison?

Exactly. The difference—for him as for his predecessor, Rodney Milnes—is that *Opera* magazine can still address approximately the kind of readership it was designed for in 1950, whereas *The Times* can't and wouldn't. With a registered circulation of around 680,000

and an aggressive marketing strategy, it has to cater for all manner of tastes and conditions unimaginable half a century ago. Allison's "highbrow musicologists" are dummies in both senses of the word. Planted between the traffic lanes, they prepare for the road-works that follow: "—yet it is surely time to acknowledge that his American works represent the peak of Weill's achievement. Where *Die Bürgschaft* can seem a terrible schlepp, *Street Scene* is one of the most humane 20th-century operas, and now this first major staging of *One Touch of Venus* confirms once again his mastery of musical theatre."

That's the sort of notice Weill must have been dreaming of once he'd stopped trying to reply to Harold Clurman's "Lost in the Stars of Broadway" and got back to *Huck Finn*.

Except that he'd never really shelved Die Bürgschaft. In fact, it was still somewhere on his agenda.

And perhaps it's still on ours, or at least in our CD collection. But who would argue that there's any mileage nowadays in a gloomy old opera about the occupation of a small and backward country by a Great Power that's seeking new markets in return for scarce natural resources and cheap labor? Not Fox News, for sure. John Allison's chirpy dismissal of *Die Bürgschaft* is, well, a sign of *The Times*. The giveaway is that word "schlepp." Unlike countless other Anglicized Americanisms from every walk of life (including baseball, which we still don't understand) "schlepp" remains unassimilated over here. It's familiar, of course, to a section of that widely traveled middle class which isn't supposed to exist any more (because everyone's joined it, etc. etc.); and it's sending a clear message to the unlucky few who have to "schlepp" their kids to city schools in gigantic SUVs which never see a hillock or a sand dune

from one year to the next. The word encapsulates an entire layer of aspirational Transatlanticism, and yet our ingenious *Times* critic is obviously aware that it comes straight from the Kaplan apartment in *Street Scene*.

Your name has sometimes been mentioned in connection with an attempt to mount a production of Street Scene in London forty or so years ago. It's said that you opposed it. What do you remember about that?

Absolutely nothing. Which isn't to say that I would have voted for a *Street Scene* in the London of the mid-1960s. The time wasn't right for it.

Why not?

An immense question. A shorthand answer might begin with some notes on Weill reception in the UK up to and including the Sadler's Wells *Mahagonny* of 1963, continue with Brecht reception after the London triumph of the Berlin Ensemble in 1956, and conclude with further notes on the status, influence, and marketability of *West Side Story* in particular, and Bernstein in general. The Wells *Mahagonny* [Colin Davis/Michael Geliot/Ralph Koltai] would make an excellent topic for a Ph.D. dissertation, so don't let's anticipate that. From a London perspective in 1965 or thereabouts, *West Side* and its perceived modernity or actuality had a direct bearing on *Street Scene* and its likely reception at that time. As for Brecht, the entire story needs to be rewritten from the ground up, without prejudice. Regarding *Street Scene*, that would entail a proper engagement with the prejudices of such apparently different but oddly interconnected opinion-makers as Kenneth Tynan and Peter Heyworth. In the context of the Cold War and all its ramifications for the UK, not least with regard to the division of Germany, the Brecht phenomenon had assumed almost mythic proportions during that perilous decade; and it held its own until the epoch-changing events of 1989.

That was thirty years after John Willett had published The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Martin Esslin Brecht: A choice of evils. How did you relate to those books—or indeed their authors, if you knew them?

Esslin was good friends with a relative of mine who worked with him in the BBC's World Service. We saw each other quite often, and I remember him with affection and gratitude. He was a key figure in that generation which Daniel Snowman researched so ably for his book *The Hitler Emigrés* (2003). Willett, on the other hand, was very much an Englishman of his generation and background, and that included distinguished war service as well as Oxford before the War. Which may partly explain why in the early 1960s I found him "foreign" in a way that Esslin wasn't. Another reason, certainly, was that we were on opposite sides of a very high and well-guarded fence, beyond which John had reserved a compound for what he and others called "Brecht's composers." Once that obstacle to our conversation had been removed, it was soon very clear to me why John was held in such high esteem and affection by so many different kinds of people.

How did he react to the events of 1989 and the reunification of Germany?

I can only guess, because it wasn't until much later that we began to see quite a lot of him and his wife Anne. He's greatly missed. I hope

for his sake that he never saw that epoch-making line in a concert or record review published a few years ago in—here we go again—*The Times*. The critic in question—a real musician, I should add—was prophesying that before long Brecht would be "just a footnote in the biographies of Weill." Wishful thinking, or another unmistakable sign of the times? Probably both. But that was before the New Millennium, and the new world we're all learning to live in. All of a sudden, Schiller and Kleist are big names in the British theatre. Attitudes inconceivable during the three decades of Brechtian hegemony—including attitudes toward Germany itself—are changing out of all recognition. That too has its implications for Weill.

Do you think the Weill Centenary had an impact in the UK?

The timing was a godsend, and it's only the gods who decide such matters. Heaven knows, and even we can guess, how many Western-type composers of one sort or another were born in 1900. But to the best of our knowledge there was only one of them whose life ended abruptly in 1950. That momentary symmetry between life and posterity was a stellar phenomenon at the start of a new millennium; and of course it was presented as such over here. We've all had to learn a lot about marketing opportunities during the last quarter-century. The centenary that arrives too soon after a series of Happy Birthdays can be as deadly as the one that arrives too late for anything to be retrieved from a vanished reputation.

Weill was exceptionally lucky in this respect. Thoughtful planning and good management saw to the rest. So the "impact" and its medium-term consequences are measurable. Less so is the seismology of reception. That's uncontrollable, and often mysterious.

For instance?

Karl Amadeus Hartmann [*b* Munich, 5 August 1905] and Constant Lambert [*b* London, 23 August 1905]. Both with Weill connections, of course—the one a national emblem, the other a precociously gifted and tragically flawed but none-the-less important local hero. With Lambert, we think we know where we stand, despite the continuing poverty of research and scholarship. But with Hartmann we hardly had a clue—and certainly no Barbican Weekend—until Ingo Metzmaier conducted a stunning performance of his Sixth Symphony for a near-capacity BBC Prom audience (say, 5,500 people, young and old) at the Royal Albert Hall on August 11th. It was an audience that had come to hear Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, flanked by Brahms's *Tragic Overture*, and the Prelude to *Lohengrin*. The Beethoven performance deserved its warm reception. But it was the Hartmann that brought the house down. I just don't know how we can "read" that on the same seismograph which recorded the impact of *One Touch of Venus*.

What are the gaps in Weill reception? Which works deserve more attention?

Knickerbocker Holiday has been an obvious candidate for attention for a long time—it has its libretto problems, of course. I suppose one might say the same of the Second Symphony and its by no means indecipherable program. But the musical argument is more to the point, so long as one isn't looking for the symphonic rhetoric of a Hartmann. The performance of the Symphony at the Proms thirty years ago—under the late-lamented Gary Bertini—was an indisputable hit, but one without the slightest consequence, either for the Proms or for the UK repertory in general.

What have been your major “milestones”?

The publication in 2000 of the German and the Anglophone editions of *Kurt Weill: A Life in Pictures and Documents*; and the exhibition “Musical Stages: Kurt Weill and His Century” with which it was associated. I’ve argued elsewhere that the book belies its handsome coffee-table appearance, and is a major work of imaginative scholarship, in fact a unique one. The exhibition (which I saw in Berlin) remains for me an indelible memory. Together, the book and the exhibition were partly instrumental in my decision, exactly five years ago, to start a new book, with the deliberately banal title, *Kurt Weill at 25*. That occupied me for two solid years, in contrast to the seventeen I’d spent on the unpublished three-volume *LLWRC* (Life & Letters, Works, Reception, Context). I then had to break off to fulfill various commissions, including a Wagner-Régeny monograph, of which the German version will be published before long. At least for me, the completion of *Weill at 25* will certainly be a milestone, and it’s already visible without binoculars. Another would be its sequel—Weill in his middle thirties. That might be reachable with the help of a few trucks and bicycles commandeered from *LLWRC*. Finally—and as of now, somewhere beyond that “blue horizon” which the admirable Harling, Robin, and Whiting copyrighted in the year I was born—*Weill at 50*.

So let’s end with another big question, like the first one: How many Weills are there?

It’s surely the flip side of the same question. For the answer is relative to where we happen to be sitting, standing, or walking at the time of asking. After the Barbican Weekend in January 2000 it seemed to be a matter of general agreement that two of the outstanding events were *Royal Palace* and *The Firebrand of Florence*. Splendidly conducted by Sir Andrew Davis, both performances are now available on CD. That represents a unity inconceivable in musical Europe thirty or forty years ago. In 1971 *Royal Palace* had been performed at the Holland Festival, broadcast across the world, and favorably reviewed in *Opera* (by Arthur Jacobs). A generation later it was still a predictable success. Not so *The Firebrand*, even for those who knew and admired the score years before the Holland Festival had rescued *Royal Palace* and the opera world had lost it again.

Elated by the *Firebrand* performance and its reception at half-time, I was heading for the lobby when I spotted a former colleague and his wife, applauding from their seats next to the aisle. They greeted me with a question whose nuances are not amenable to the printed word: “Did you enjoy that?”, they asked. “Yes I did!”, I replied, in a tone adjusted to whatever might follow, since something surely would. Eyes brightened. “So did we!”, one of them confessed, and then paused for a moment’s thought. “But it’s not the Weill we love, is it?”

I responded with a smile and hoped it would seem sympathetic rather than condescending. Indeed, I was grateful for so poignant a reminder of the context in which I’d begun working on Weill. In the UK of the 1950s and 1960s, the natural audience for Weill’s music—from London and Brighton to Manchester and Leeds, and thence to York and Edinburgh—was one whose post-war profile was shaped by that extraordinarily rich influx from Continental Europe that had ended with the last of the *Kindertransporte* from Vienna in 1939. To that generation of political, economic, and cultural migrants my friends at the Barbican *Firebrand* were directly related. The Weill they “loved” was the one their parents knew

before they arrived here; and the one they were hearing that evening was, well, other. Does that make two Weills? In a sense, yes.

Some months ago, the BBC broadcast a tribute to Furtwängler on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. It was a 5-hour program of performances, interviews, and discussions, so rich in content that I listened to the entire thing again a day or two later. It was during this second hearing that one of the outstanding passages reminded me, all of a sudden, that this was a world from which Weill had effortlessly excluded himself. The voices and testimonials were those of two Elisabeths: Furtwängler’s widow (speaking with astonishing dignity and composure of her husband’s last hours); and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, in masterly form. Oh what an artist! Incongruously, it was her words that reminded me of Lenya’s story of an informal meeting, probably in London and certainly in the early 60s, with Schwarzkopf and her equally formidable husband, Walter Legge.

His and her domain was of course the Grand Tradition in European classical music, up to and including Strauss (with some allowance, on Legge’s part, for Hindemith, but none for the Schoenberg school). Partly because Legge carried a candle for Busoni, he had a soft spot for Weill. Schwarzkopf apparently did not. According to Lenya, who admired her candor and was much amused, she admitted to a distinct and indeed extreme aversion to all his works. Whether it was “September Song” or *The Seven Deadly Sins*, *Berlin im Licht* or *Lady in the Dark*, she found it equally detestable. There you have it. The One Weill. Trouble Man from start to finish.

Your entry on Weill in Grove 6 (1980) notoriously ends with a section entitled “The Two Weills.” In Grove 7 (2001), that section has vanished without trace, and J. Bradford Robinson has supplied a new one. Did you withdraw its predecessor?

No. Its removal and replacement were the culmination of an extensive re-write of the entire 1980 article by other hands—a complex process already completed before I even got wind of it (by sheer chance, as it happens). “Oh dear, I do hope there hasn’t been a misunderstanding,” was the comment of a much-loved and very senior figure in the Grove hierarchy. Having no reason to doubt his good intentions, I can only hope that there was indeed a misunderstanding; if there wasn’t, it was something rather worse. So let’s draw a veil over it. Or rather, leave the veil just where it was three years ago, when Tamara Levitz [see *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 20, no. 2, (Fall 2002): 4–9] signally failed to raise so much as a corner of it.

We invited you to publish a rejoinder, but you declined.

Unavoidably at the time, but rightly in the longer term—or so I felt the other day, when I reread Levitz’s piece and found that time had been less kind to it than I would have liked to be three years ago. Where were those tears of mirth with which I’d once read that “much has changed in the last twenty years, including David Drew himself”? At long last, the penny has dropped, shiny and severe as a new Euro: Levitz’s “twenty years” are those that had elapsed between Grove’s 6 and 7; and her backhanded compliment had been intended for someone who had done the decent thing by dumping “The Two Weills” and thus renouncing the colonialist and binarist follies of his middle years.

Which all goes to prove the old adage that journalists of every sort—especially academic ones on a Research Assessment Exercise—need to be rigorous in checking their sources. The fear of spoil-

ing a “good” story can best be overcome by the hope of finding a better one which happens to be true. Sure enough, the mysterious disappearance of “The Two Weills” is not in fact an isolated incident, but is symptomatic of a now widespread malaise in editing and in lexicography. “Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?” asked Edmund Wilson in his famous essay, much to the annoyance of Agatha Christie’s countless admirers. But at least he asked the question, and they could resoundingly answer, “we do!”

Opera North’s *Venus* is a reminder that among the admirers of the original Broadway production was Bruno Walter. According to Abravanel, he became mildly besotted with the show, and couldn’t keep away. Thanks to Opera North, and also indeed to “changing attitudes,” that brief love affair of 1943 is readily understandable. But how many of us gave a thought to it in 1963, while *Mahagonny* was blazing at the Sadler’s Wells Theatre?

In most of the towns and cities toured by Opera North, there are now major “urban regeneration projects.” Smart bars and cool restaurants line the banks of newly dredged canals dating from the first Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, visitors from London who chance to wander off course will soon discover communities whose representatives are seldom seen at opera performances. That

may change. Attitudes change. Meanwhile, as your Mr. Rumsfeld is telling us, “stuff happens”; and because of it, there’s now another crisis about our so-called national identity.

Yes, it’s been a shock to discover that among the younger generation of Britons there are many who are not only unwilling to distinguish between the responsibilities of parliamentary democracy and the “Hier-darfst-Du” excesses of corporate power, but are prepared to argue (in the presence of TV cameras) that indiscriminate violence against innocent civilians is a logical if regrettable response to the “overwhelming force” with which our present Government chose to be associated, for reasons best known to itself.

Although foreign policy initiatives and national self-interest were never matters of public debate in the City of Mahagonny—that was left to *Die Bürgerschaft* and *Der Kuhhandel*—the comprehension gap between Jim Mahoney and Rodney Hatch is as great today as it ever was. Not for the sake of rescuing a binary Weill from the deconstruction teams, nor even in sorrowful recollection of the Adorno Centenary on September 11th, 2003, it’s a gap we need to close. Otherwise there’ll be no friendly conversations in the aisles, nor amicable bargaining in the market-places. Just confusion and bad blood, and ultimately, mayhem.