

Before hearing 'Royal Palace'

Josef Heinzemann: Exactly when did Weill compose Royal Palace?

David Drew: In the winter of 1925–6.

Gary Bertini: That's only two years after the Recordare, which surely belongs to quite another world.

DD: It does. But those two years were particularly eventful. Between the Recordare and Royal Palace came an orchestral suite, a cantata, an orchestral song-cycle, a violin concerto, and the opera Der Protagonist. Moreover, 1924 had marked two turning-points in Weill's life. It was the year when he first travelled abroad – to Italy – and also the year of Busoni's death – 'our beloved Busoni' as he'd called him in a heart-broken letter sent to his parents when he knew his master was dying. The Italian journey coincided with a sudden widening of his musical horizons, which had hitherto been almost exclusively Central European but which now included Stravinsky, Bartok, and the modern Italian school; and Busoni's death affected him in many ways, not least in his decision to explore the possibilities on non-tonal harmony. Musically there were losses as well as gains. Neither the Concerto nor Der Protagonist are as firmly built as the earlier works. It seems that Weill needed a year or so in which to recover his balance after the shock of Busoni's death. And then he was able to tell his parents: 'I'm immersed in this new opera; and I find to my joy that my music will be much more assured, much freer, lighter – and simpler.'

JH: The opera was Royal Palace?

DD: Yes. And its librettist was the poet and playwright Yvan Goll, a native of Alsace who divided his time between Paris and Berlin and wrote with equal fluency in French and in German.

JH: At first reading, Royal Palace struck me as oddly Wagnerian; and it is, after all, a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk.

DD: Or, in today's jargon, a mixed-media work. Within its dramatic frame there are episodes of film, of ballet and pantomime, of pure lyricism and abstract colour-play; and within its operatic one (arias, ensembles, and so on), there's quasi-symphonic music, ballet music (though not in the Franco-Russian style!) modern dance-music, and jazz. Weill had originally asked Goll for a libretto that would 'present a tragic situation by merry or grotesque means' – in short, a kind of 'tragic revue'. But as the idea evolved in other directions, he saw the work as a 'lyrical counterpart' to the violent and expressionistic Protagonist, which he had written with Georg Kaiser a year earlier. Royal Palace was first produced in 1927 at the Berlin Staatsoper, with Erich Kleiber conducting. Alban Berg – who had a special bond with Kleiber's Staatsoper – must have read about the production; and I suspect that the much-maligned film-episode in his Lulu was inspired by reports of the one in Royal Palace. As for Wagner, there are certainly traces of Tristan and even of Parsifal, which isn't surprising in view of Weill's early musical upbringing.

GB: But is most surprising in view of his later association with Busoni, who was no Wagnerian!

DD: That's one of the fascinations of Royal Palace. For Busoni's sake Weill had tried to forget not only Wagner, but also Mahler, Schreker, and Schoenberg, all of whom had influenced his early development. Yet the one thing that consoled him for Busoni's death was his new friendship with Kaiser, whose work Busoni had disliked and whose first musical love was Wagner. Psychologically speaking, Busoni's death meant that Weill was free to revert to his early interests as far as his present ones allowed. His conscious mind may still have been 'against' Wagner; but his inner ear wasn't. And so it remained. One can hear strange subterranean echoes of Wagner in Mahagonny and in many of the later works, including Der Silbersee. But in Royal Palace,

and only there, Wagner came back by way of Schreker. That Italian lakeside setting, those sensual fantasies, and those 'far-off sounds'! And isn't the heroine, Dejanira, in some respects a descendant of the Schreker heroines – though in others, dare I say, a forerunner of today's 'Liberated' women? 'Free, free, free again from all three of you', she sings at the end. The 'three' are The Husband, whose heart and soul have long since been swallowed up by his bank-account; Yesterday's Lover, who helplessly clings to Dejanira and his erotic memories; and Tomorrow's Inamorato who – like Gonzalvo in Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole* – sees in love nothing but an excuse for poeticizing.

GB: What an extraordinary libretto Goll has written! On the printed page it looks crazy, and in a way it is. But only if one disregards its relationship to the musical sense. The musicality of the text is something very rare in modern opera libretti.

DD: It reminds me a little of the poems Messiaen writes for his own music. There's a similar kind of concocted language similarly derived from the French symbolists and surrealists, and from exotic sources – in Goll's case, Indian, negro and Jewish (the Kabbalah). In another way it suggests comparisons with Michael Tippett's opera libretti – *The Knot Garden* even more than *The Midsummer Marriage*. There's the same kind of riddle-making, and the same indifference to the laws and dynamics of the spoken theatre.

JH: Which isn't to say that Goll lacked a sense of theatre. On the contrary he showed a considerable flair for it in those early absurdist plays which Brecht so much admired. *Methusalem*, especially, is a remarkable and prophetic achievement.

DD: Without *Methusalem*, *Royal Palace* (and the Goll cantata which immediately preceded it) might never have happened. Goll had come to Berlin for the German première of *Methusalem* (directed by Wilhelm Dieterle and designed by Georg Grosz) and was introduced to Weill by their mutual friend, Kaiser. The idea of a 'tragic revue' was obviously inspired by *Methusalem*; and in fact *Royal Palace* is a 'lyrical counterpart' to that work rather than to *Der Protagonist*. (It was dedicated to Kaiser, who in turn wrote a laudatory preface to *Methusalem*). *Methusalem* himself – a grotesque figure representing 'the eternal bourgeois' – reappears in the guise of The Husband, while the Revolutionary Student is transformed into The Young Fisherman.

GB: Shades of Stravinsky's *Rossignol*!

DD: But *Royal Palace* gives us little idea of what a *Methusalem*-opera by Weill might have sounded like, since the few satirical elements are subservient to the lyrical ones, and are in fact travesties of them. For instance, the idyllic bell-music which opens the opera becomes a raucous foxtrot as the curtain rises on a scene depicting the lakeside terrace of the luxury hotel where Dejanira and her male companions are trying to disentangle their lives.

GB: That must be one of the first examples of Weill's use of jazz idioms.

DD: It is the very first; and the music for the film-scene which opens the second part of the work is of course a wild development of it. The film, as you know, represents The Husband's ideas of pleasure, happiness and success; and the music is an expressionistic montage of jazz and dance idioms, most of them harshly distorted. It scandalised the conservative critics in 1927 – one of them suggested, apparently in all seriousness, that it was time the police were called in to protect opera-goers such affronts. Even today the piece has a disturbing effect.

GB: provided it's heard and felt in the context of the work's predominantly lyrical music.

DD: And there, I think, Weill re-discovers the visionary quality of his early

music and at times – as Gunther Schuller has remarked – approaches greatness. It was certainly brave of him to base the work on a type of molto espressivo writing which was contrary to everything the then-fashionable ‘Neue-Sachlichkeit’ represented. There is, perhaps, a historical parallel between the Weill of Royal Palace and the Henze of (for example) Il Re Cervo.

JH: As far as Goll was concerned, Royal Palace certainly represented a partial retreat into a private world of magic and myth. What it owes to the anti-bourgeois satire of Methusalem has been removed from its political context.

DD: and the rest is closely related to a very different Goll play, Melusine. In the final Tanz der Wasserfrau, Dejanira in effect becomes Melusine. But The Husband, who has shown no sign of comprehending anything that can’t be bought or sold, thinks she’s drowning.

GB: Musically, that tango-finale seems to summarise everything in the score that anticipates the ‘famous’ Weill works. One could immediately guess who composed it even if one knew nothing of Weill apart from the Dreigroschenoper.

DD: But there’s one feature of that tango which is peculiar to it – the way that the bell-sounds which began the work steal back again and gradually envelope the tango music, whose rhythms and modulations they ignore. The independent acceleration of the bell-rhythm is achieved by a purely mathematical progression (corresponding to the one which had produced a deceleration just before Dejanira’s final aria). It’s just the kind of effect that Charles Ives was interested in, except that here its function is dramatic. While the main harmony relates back to the prophecy of the Old Fisherman – that one of the four will die – the conflicting bell-harmony carries the imagination forward. What we are left with at the end is no longer the clearly evocative campanology of the beginning, but rather was Valéry called ‘the mysterious echo of things, and their secret harmony – as real and as certain, to all artistic minds, as a mathematical ratio.’

Before hearing *Der Silbersee*

Gary Bertini: I can't imagine that Brecht would have felt much at home with Royal Palace. But Der Silbersee should have been more to his liking. Did he know the music?

David Drew: Not unless he heard it from Ernst Busch or Eisler at the time of its publication in January 1933. By then he and Weill were far apart. But later that year Weill was persuaded briefly to renew the collaboration; and the result was Die sieben Todsünden, which happens to contain a pointed musical quotation from Der Silbersee (and also one from Die Bürgschaft).

Jo Elsendoorn: When and how did Weill and Brecht first meet?

DD: A month or so after the première of Royal Palace. Through Kaiser (again!). Brecht was devoted to Kaiser, who in his opinion was an 'indispensable pioneer' of the new drama. He used to refer to him as one of his 'two natural fathers' – a typical way of avoiding the word 'spiritual'. No less typically, Kaiser had declared: 'A great poet lives in this age of night. His name is Bert Brecht. Amen.'

JE: It's often supposed that there was an abrupt change in Weill's musical style after he began collaborating with Brecht.

DD: It would, I think, be truer to say that a major stylistic development that was already under way before Weill met Brecht was hastened by the collaboration. There isn't a single musical feature of what he wrote in Germany after meeting Brecht that isn't clearly foreshadowed somewhere in his earlier work. But once he'd decided in favour of tonality and a new simplicity, the influences of senior contemporary composers disappeared, and his roots in the classical and romantic traditions were strengthened. Those are the roots of his so-called 'popular' style in all its forms.

GB: The outward simplicity of that style can be very deceptive. There's always a risk of underestimating the subtlety of the content. Especially of one's tempted to regard, say, Royal Palace as more 'modern' than the later works because its relatively intricate in texture and much more dissonant. Modernity, in that sense, isn't the point. What matters is the musical substance. And the substance of such works as Der Silbersee and Die sieben Todsünden is unique. Originality and craftsmanship of this order just isn't conceivable in terms of literary influences.

DD: Nevertheless, the influence of Brecht, or at any rate the electricity generated by the collaboration, played a very important part in Weill's development. Above all, it increased his awareness of music's potential relationship to the changing structure of society. As early as 1918 he'd followed Mahler's example and incorporated frankly plebeian material in an otherwise 'patrician' work. But that work had ended with an elaborate fugue. In Royal Palace the supremacy of 'high' and bourgeois culture is insistently challenged from below; and in the Dreigroschenoper, the plebeian voices have almost drowned the rest. The conservative ears that was alarming enough. And when the same rebellious voices resounded in the opera house, as they did in Mahagonny, police protection was not only demanded but actually provided!

JE: That was about the time when Georg Grosz fell foul of the police, for rather similar reasons. The affinities between Weill and Grosz are interesting.

DD: A documentary film about Grosz was made shortly before his death; and for the musical accompaniment he wanted nothing but Weill. The Weill of Die Dreigroschenoper and parts of Mahagonny is certainly close to Grosz. But in the later works, as in the earlier ones, there's much that has no equivalent in Grosz's art. I'm thinking not only of the austere 'classical' works like Der Jasager, but also of Der Silbersee, where the more popular idioms are directly related to the Volkstümlichkeit of the romantics and the earthiness of Verdi.

JE: In his autobiographical sketch, Weill writes that the 1933 première of

Der Silbersee was the greatest critical success he ever had in Germany. Yet the event isn't even recorded in any of the available reference books – all of which agree that Weill's greatest success was *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Which was right, Weill or the reference books?

DD: Both. The *Dreigroschenoper* was certainly Weill's greatest box-office success in Germany, but the critics were more divided about its merits than they were about those of *Der Silbersee*, which received rapturous notices almost everywhere. There's a simple reason why this success was never widely publicised. When *Der Silbersee* was first performed, in February 1933, Hitler was already Chancellor. His dictatorship was inaugurated ten days later; and all further performances of *Der Silbersee* were instantly cancelled. From that day until this, Weill's original score hasn't been heard again (though a much-reduced arrangement of it was presented in Berlin some 15 years ago).

JE: What has stood in the way of its post-war revival?

DD: One obstacle, certainly, has been the problem of casting a modified *Singspiel* in which the drama is substantial and demands highly experienced actors, yet the music isn't so easy even for professional singers: here and there – notably in Severin's Verdian revenge-aria, which is the nub of the whole drama – it's downright impossible without them. But where are the professional singers who can convincingly act such a long and difficult play? Since they couldn't be found in 1933, some important sections of the score had to be omitted. So the forthcoming performances in The Hague will be the first hearing of the complete score.

JE: Did Kaiser resent the claims of the music?

DD: On the contrary. From this exile in Switzerland in 1939 he wrote saying 'Weill composed a beautiful score for *Der Silbersee*. An immortal score. Art lives longer than politics. I don't despair'.

GB: Unless one hears the score intact, one misses a lot. Its unity is most remarkable – all the more so since Weill uses a wide variety of idioms and very few motivial links (far fewer than in *Royal Palace*). Each number has its own specific and memorable character, and the juxtapositions are very bold: for instance, the way the *Zauberflöte*-like scene in the police-station is interrupted mid-way by the tango-song of the Lottery Agent.

DD: *Die Zauberflöte* had a special place in Weill's affections, and *Der Silbersee* is neither the first nor the last work of this that owes something to its example. But it is the one which is most obviously related to the moral concerns of that work; and although its musico-dramatic form was necessarily much less ambitious, the three main levels of musical expression correspond to the three in *Die Zauberflöte*. That's to say, the choral music corresponds to the 'Masonic' level, while the solo music is divided between the quasi-operatic and the popular levels.

GB: And the orchestra is intermediary!

DD: In the finale, where all three levels are miraculously brought together, it's the orchestra which initiates every stage.

First with that superb canonic prelude; then with the melodrama, which represents the operatic level and is musically of such intensity that one scarcely notices the absence of singing: and finally with the reprise of the lake's waltz-music, to which the solo soprano and the chorus add an inspired development.

GB: It's extraordinary how that last section of the finale complements the *Royal Palace* finale. Both are 'magic' transformation-scenes against the background of a symbolic lake. But the first, in tango-rhythm, represents a renunciation of life, while the second, in waltz-rhythm, represents an

affirmation of life. I can't believe that the parallels were accidental.

DD: I'm sure they weren't. And the intention becomes clearer if one compares the beginning of the two works. In Royal Palace the curtain rises on a luxury hotel beside a lake: the hotel-guests have wined and dined their way round the world, and are none the happier for it. In Der Silbersee the curtain rises on a few wretched huts beside a lake: the hut-dwellers are half starved refugees from a society that has nothing to offer them, and their only hope of survival lies in collective action. Between them and the forces of 'law and order' there's a deeper and clearer enmity than there is between the hotel-guests and the fisherman of Royal Palace. In Der Silbersee even the shopgirls sing about the principles of capitalist price-regulation; and the mephistophelian Lottery Agent, in his tango-song, makes a more seductive case for the charms of the stockmarket than The Husband in Royal Palace ever dreamt of.

JE: Where did Kaiser's political sympathies lie?

DD: Not, I'm sure, with the 'official' parties of the Left. Like his fellow-expressionist Ernst Toller, though more remotely, he'd been connected with the Bavarian Räterepublik – through his friend Gustav Landauer, who was one of its leaders. There are traces of anarcho-syndicalist ideas in his work. Also of Tolstoy (without the theology). But he was no more a 'political' artist than Weill. They subtitled Der Silbersee 'ein Wintermärchen', which suggests Heine's 'Deutschland'.

JE: Was it meant to?

DD: Probably. But their 'winter's fairy-tale' isn't only, or even principally, about Germany in that last, appalling, winter before Hitler (though the relevance of Fennimore's Caesar-ballad was clear enough). It's about any society that is fatally divided against itself. And since 'private' emotions would only have confused the issue, the ideals of romantic love which figure in Royal Palace and its forebears are replaced by social ideals. And they're no more, and no less, political than Don Fernando's words in Fidelio: 'Es sucht der Bruder seine Brüder und kann er helfen hilft er gern'.

David Drew, May 1971