An Epic Cantata by David Drew

Weill composed *The Lindbergh Flight* in 1929. It is the second of the two cantatas on texts by Bertolt Brecht (the first being *Das Berliner Requiem*) which he wrote during the 12 months following the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*. (In that same period he finished his three-act opera *Mahagonny* and composed his score for *Happy End*.) The first performance was conducted by Otto Klemperer at a Berlin concert in November 1929, and was well received. In style the work derives from the *Berliner Requiem* and hence from the more 'classical' and austere passages in *Mahagonny*. It has no affinities with *The Threepenny Opera* or *Happy End;* and the allusions to popular music and jazz, which are commonly held to be typical of Weill, are confined to two short numbers. For the first time since 1925, Weill used a normal medium-sized orchestra; but from this are drawn various smaller ensembles. Orchestration is one of the elements that define the many and progressively illuminating relationships between the 15 numbers. The idea of an upward and outward exploration from modest beginnings determines the total form.

When, in May 1927, Charles Lindbergh completed the first transatlantic solo flight, both hemispheres rejoiced as if at the dawn of a new age. No flying exploit of more recent times has inspired such unquestioning enthusiasm; nor has any later explorer been so idolised by the general

public or so fervently wooed by commerce and high society. In 'Lucky Lindbergh' the 20th century discovered the embodiment of its simpler dreams, and show business discovered a star greater than Hollywood's. The 'common man' who landed his frail craft at Le Bourget stepped out into a world that had cast him as Superman. In that respect the Lindbergh of the popular imagination was foreign to everything Weill stood for. When Stokowski introduced his cantata to America, audiences were baffled and dismayed by the sombre and profoundly un-American tone of the music.

In his writings as in his works, Weill repeatedly affirmed the necessity of finding a universal and if possible timeless context for whatever was local and contemporary. 'Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*,' he once wrote, 'is no less a mirror of our time than Chaplin's *Gold Rush*.' In *The Lindbergh Flight* he reverses Stravinsky's process. Actuality is robbed of its news value and pushed into the past, where it seems to merge with myth and ritual. While preserving his own unmistakable individuality, Weill established a historical perspective that extends back from his own age—represented by the first two numbers—through those of Liszt and Mendelssohn, and then of Bach and Handel, to that of plainsong.

After the first two numbers, almost nothing about the character of the music could be guessed from a mere reading of Brecht's text. Even in the second number, where Lindbergh announces that he is an American and reveals his native courage, the 'jazzy' idiom is stressedly European and the 'brave' tone stressedly unheroic. In the very next number Weill removes the protagonist not only from his home country but also from his century: the aviator sings of his flight-equipment in the tones of a Mussorgskian Old Believer. Each 'historical' allusion in the score has its own expressive and formal function. The three-part invention of the 'Fog' chorus does not comment on Bach—despite the direct reference to the C minor Fugue of the first book of the *48*: it merely reflects what Weill described as Fog's 'reactionary' attitudes. There is nothing nebulous about the counterpoint, yet its rigidity and final paralysis explain why Fog has to order the more dynamic 'Snowstorm' to continue the assault upon the flier. However, Lindbergh's greatest enemy, as Weill remarked, is neither Fog nor Storm, but the enemy within. The hypnotic song of sleep transforms motives from Lindbergh's opening 'jazz' number into a lullaby for some modern Mephistopheles to sing to Faust beside the banks of the Elbe.

Stage by stage, the neo-classical and neo-romantic elements in the score are drawn ever more closely together until in the last two numbers they are fused. The penultimate number is a sinfonia in C minor. It refers to the public rejoicings, but does not directly evoke them. The gravity of tone prepares for the finale, where the text's general conclusions are significantly modified and deepened by the music. Today no less than in the Twenties, we perhaps need to be reminded that technological progress is not synonymous with progress in other fields; that man may 'raise himself up'

only to fall from a greater height than before; and that even if he does not fall, achievement is, among other things, a means of discovering what has yet to be achieved.

The first and unpublished setting of Brecht's 'Lindbergh' text was a joint composition for radio by Weill and Hindemith. In that form—with the numbers divided about equally between the two composers—it was presented at the 1929 summer festival of modern German music in Baden-Baden. Weill and Hindemith then withdrew their manuscripts. They had been competing rather than collaborating, and in a sense Weill had won the competition. But in producing, as he now did, a substantial cantata for concert performance, he was following his own inclination, not Brecht's. With good reason, Brecht did not take kindly to the idea of being a mere librettist. For him, the original *Lindbergh Flight* was a 'radio play', and music was at best a secondary consideration. So in 1930 he staked his own claim on the text, and published a revised and greatly expanded version entitled *The Flight of the Lindberghs: a didactic radio play for boys and girls.* In function and significance, no less than in structure, it is an independent work. Whereas the text of *The Lindbergh Flight* is wholly unpolitical and is largely defined by Weill's music, *The Flight of the Lindberghs* is the work of a committed Marxist, and is in no sense a work of Weill's. Consequently Brecht felt able to make subsequent dispositions on his own account. In 1950 he wrote to a German radio station saying that 'in my radio play' the name of Lindbergh must be suppressed and the title changed to *Der Ozeanflug,* 'The Ocean Flight'. A prologue explaining that the aviator's political divagations in the Thirties necessitated these changes was to be spoken at the outset. Weill was already on his death-bed, and apparently remained in ignorance of the correspondence.

Weill's cantata will receive its first British performance at the Proms on 25 July (Radio 3). In conformity with current agreements relating to Brecht's measures of 1950, it will be given under the title 'Der Ozeanflug' and the name of the protagonist will be suppressed.