

About the program:

BASTILLE MUSIC

In the third week of October 1927 Weill composed and orchestrated nearly 20 minutes of music for a production in Berlin the following month of Strindberg's historical play *Gustav III*. The director was Victor Barnovsky; the cast was headed by Rudolf Forster; and the conductor of the 12-piece orchestra was Walter Goehr.

Unlike the drama by Scribe which provided the basis for Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, Strindberg's *Gustav III* ends in 1789 three years before the masked ball at which the king was assassinated. It ends, in fact, with the news of the storming of the Bastille. A sense of impending social upheaval at a time when — to quote Strindberg's Thomas Thorild — “a rotten civilisation is descending into its grave” informs the entire play. Although Barnovsky's 1927 production was scarcely revolutionary, some of his collaborators were at pains to stress the contemporary significance of the play, and none more so than Weill: the music not only avoids any kind of 18th-century pastiche—except for the ironic purposes of the Minuet — but so far from illustrating the play and seeking to match its character, it adopts an aggressively independent line. If its plebeian accents and rude epithets bear any relation to Strindberg's drama, it is only in so far as the music seems to become the voice of the off-stage mob which is heard rioting at the end of the first act, and triumphantly singing the Carmagnole during the final scene. The Carmagnole — that favorite marching-song of the Revolutionary troops, in which Louis XVI and his queen were pilloried as “M et Mme Veto” — is of course the tune trilled by the piccolos in the Finale of the present suite. The suite was made for the London Sinfonietta's 1975 concerts in Berlin. An earlier and somewhat longer version was first performed in 1971 at Aberdeen University, by an ensemble directed by Ian Kemp.

WALT WHITMAN SONGS

In the period following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor Weill devoted his musical energies to the task of writing music for purposes connected with America's war effort. The most substantial of his musical contributions were the three Walt Whitman settings of 1942 (the final setting was added five years later.) Written with Paul Robeson in mind, they are clearly dissociated from the “classical” Lieder tradition in which Weill had been steeped as a young man. Despite certain harmonic formulations that derive from his European experience and anticipate the relatively austere manner of the narrative choruses in *Lost in the Stars*, they are for the most part rooted in the tradition of the popular American ballad.

STRING QUARTET NO. 1, OPUS 8

Like his second symphony, Weill's second string quartet was published as his first. In its present form it was completed in March 1923, and first performed at a modern-music festival in Frankfurt on June 24. The players on that occasion were the Amar Quartet (whose violist, Paul Hindemith, was already by far the most celebrated German composer of Weill's generation). Soon afterwards, the work was taken up by the Roth Quartet, who toured with it in Germany and abroad. Maurice Ravel was among those who attended the Paris premiere and commented favorably on it.

Although it was the earliest of Weill's published works and the first to be performed at all widely, the Opus 8 quartet is in some respects less characteristic than several of its unpublished predecessors, including the B minor Quartet of 1918. Yet Weill's fingerprints are apparent, and often strikingly so — for instance at the start of the *molto tranquillo* episode that closes the first movement, and again, more extensively, in the Mahlerian toy soldiers' march that interrupts the central scherzo.

The march is in fact a borrowing from the *Zaubernacht* pantomime of 1922. A much more significant borrowing, however, accounts for the strange texture of the final choral fantasy, and helps define its inner sense. A re-working of the closing section of Weill's 1921 Symphony, the Chorale Fantasy excludes the socio-political aspirations of that work and seems to concentrate on the philosophical and theological ones. The center of the movement is an entirely new invention and surely the finest in the whole work: as if in answer to the "dry" neo-classical counterpoint of the opening section, the cello initiates an impassioned song which is taken up by each of the other instruments (always with a harp-like accompaniment) and then most beautifully resolved by instrumental recitatives that could almost be called cantillations — for they introduce the chorale theme in a manner that eloquently substantiates Weill's dedication to his father.

MARIE GALANTE

Marie Galante, a play by Jacques Deval adapted from his best-selling novel of the same name, was furnished with songs and incidental music at a relatively late stage in its gestation. The project was initiated by Weill's new publisher in France — one of whose executives wrote the lyrics under the pen name Roger Fernay — and is thus quite distinct from those stage works — including of course all the major ones — in which his collaboration was crucial from the start. In principle, however, *Marie Galante* is a direct successor to *Happy End*, a score likewise intended to be "commercial," but which likewise failed dismally and was not seen again in Weill's lifetime.

Despite the five years that had elapsed, *Happy End* was very much on Weill's mind when he reluctantly started work on *Marie Galante* towards the end of August 1934. Adaptations of no less than four *Happy End* numbers found their way into the draft (which he completed within a week or so) and two of these reached the final score: "Les filles de Bordeaux" is a transmogrification of one of the Salvation Army songs, while the main section of the "Scène au Dancing" is an arrangement of the "Song of the Hard Nut." Such self-borrowings are, however, characteristic of almost every work Weill wrote for the theater after he had abandoned the idea of returning to Germany, and it would be as wrong to overlook what is new in the *Marie Galante* score as it would be to dismiss the piece as a mere pot-boiler. In *Marie Galante* Weill

achieves among other things a distinctively personal commentary on the chanson styles that flourished in the inter-war period and attracted several of the composers with whom he associated during his brief residence in France — notably Auric, Honegger, and Jean Weïner. The cabaret idioms first cultivated by Erik Satie in the Chat Noir days had by the 1930's acquired a strong but deeply un-American "blues" coloring. The kind of simplification which such idioms entailed for Weill is at its starkest in Marie's "theme song," "J'attends un navire."

When listening to the song it is helpful to know that Marie is a *putain respecteuse* who has been abducted from Bordeaux and off-loaded at a South American port. Her only device is to return as swiftly as possible to her beloved France. But since officialdom proves difficult to her plight she is forced to earn the price of her passage back to Bordeaux by the only means available to her. Unwittingly embroiled in an espionage intrigue, she is murdered on the eve of her longed for departure.

"J'attends un navire" contains no premonitions of that end (as "Le grand Lustucru" certainly does). On the popular chanson level it is clearly intended as a counterpoint to the *Mahagonny* "Alabama Song," whose refrain is just as firmly anchored to the tonic harmony. But in this case there is no irony and no cause for it. In a manner diametrically opposed to that of the savage-sounding introduction to the "Alabama" refrain, the opening "verse" frankly advertises the refrain's popular appeal. "J'attends un navire" is the earliest of Weill's show tunes to have been conceived as a hit-song, pure and simple, and a hit it deservedly became.

And yet the score of *Marie Galante* has lain unperformed since the star-studded production opened and closed at the Théâtre de Paris in December 1934. The fact that commercial recordings and sheet music editions kept some of the song alive in France for more than a decade may help explain some distant echoes of them in the work of such composers as Joseph Kosha. But if at times Weill's characteristic wizardry with a small "pit" orchestra calls to mind the classic French cinema of Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, or Julien Duvivier, that is surely a tribute to Maurice Jaubert, the outstanding French film-composer of the prewar era. Jaubert, however, was not in the first place a song writer; and song is the essence of *Marie Galante*. Paradoxically, the authentic "Quai des Brûmes" atmosphere is first conjured up by "Le train du Ciel," which is in fact a chorus of black mourners. In the final song, "Le grand Lustucru," Weill foretells with uncanny accuracy the mood of France in the late 1930's and of the Left Bank ten years later. Yet the song was not rediscovered until the newly rebellious 1960's, when Luciano Berio arranged it for Cathy Berberian.

The concert version performed this evening presents all the principle songs, here sung by a soprano, and in an order different from that designated in the play.