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LOTTE LENYA
IN
KURT WEILL'S
DIE SIEBEN TODSÜNDEN

(The Seven Deadly Sins)

Ballet mit Gesang

Text by BERTOLT BRECHT

with Male Quartet and Orchestra conducted by WILHEM BRÜCKNER-RÜGGERBERG

The work which Constant Lambert described as "the most important in ballet form since *Les Noces* and *Parade*" was commissioned by Edward James for his company "Les Ballets 1933". It was composed in Paris in the spring of 1933, and first performed at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées on June 7 of the same year under the title *Les Sept Péchés Capitaux*. The choreography was by Balanchine, and the leading dancer was Tilly Losch. The text by Bertolt Brecht was sung in the original German by the composer's wife, Lotte Lenya, and the decor was by Brecht's lifelong collaborator, Caspar Neher. In July, 1933, the entire company, with its conductor, Maurice de Abravanel, was brought to the Savoy Theatre, London, and the production of *Les Sept Péchés Capitaux* was staged under the more consoling title *Anna-Anna* (a reference to the dual personality of the protagonist).

Forced to flee for his life from Hitler's Germany, Weill was no longer able to continue his relationship with his publishers, and in the turmoil of a double emigration (first to Paris and then to New York) the score was never published. There being no opportunity of a production in New York, the score was shelved and its existence was virtually forgotten until 1956, when Lotte Lenya made the present recording in Germany.

The work occupies a very special territory somewhere between the scenic cantata (for instance, *Les Noces*) and the masque (for instance, *Job*). Its cantata-like qualities make it particularly suitable for hearing as a concert-work or on a gramophone record. There are a very few passages in the score which require visual explanation if their placing and their full expressive purpose is to be made clear—the savage repetitions of a single phrase after the Introduction to *Jealousy* is the most notable instance of a device depending on action (six visions of the previous Sins.)

The self-sufficiency of the music owes much to Weill's remarkable and *daring* sense of structure. Although the material and the forms have an appearance of simplicity, the whole structure is extraordinarily subtle. The listener who experiences the breathtaking and deeply stirring effect of the return of the Introduction-music at the close of the score will not need to be told that such an effect could never be obtained by the mere formality of reprise. The *Finaletto* achieves finality in the fullest sense—it is the closing of a musical, dramatic and imaginative circle which began with the opening bars of the work, and developed continuously. Analysis shows that the unity of *The Seven Deadly Sins* depends to some extent on a method of musical organisation developed by Weill in his early instrumental and operatic works, but

temporarily discarded after he began his collaboration with Brecht. But what analysis does not show, and what we must try to sense, is the true nature of the experience which lies behind the notes.

The surface meaning of *The Seven Deadly Sins* is clear enough, especially if we bear in mind Brecht's full title, "The Seven Deadly Sins of the *Petit-Bourgeois*" (*Die Sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger*). In so far as the two sisters are but aspects of one person, the singing Anna is "reason" and the dancing Anna "instinct"—in other words, intellect versus flesh, the favoured theme of both tragedy and comedy. But the Annas are subject to a higher law, namely, the wishes of their family, and through them the dictates of reason become the dictates of expediency. Expediency alone decides whether the flesh shall be indulged or subjugated. In each stage of the action, the "reasonable" Anna defeats the "instinctive" Anna, and after each triumph of expediency, the family is able to add a few more bricks to its house (this is represented, grotesquely, on the stage). At the close of *Envy*, the house is complete, and the family sing of a "triumph over self."

But the music explains, and the stage action must elaborate, the point that Anna II sacrifices not Self, but Self-Respect in order to achieve material success (for others). In *Sloth* she must be as active and as unscrupulous as others in the pursuit of wealth. In *Pride* she must give the people what they will pay most for (*Kitsch* and cheap eroticism), and not what she would proudly like to give them (Art). In *Anger* she must suppress her desire to protest against man's inhumanity to man ("He who does no wrong will atone for it on earth" is the work's most tragically ironic message). In *Gluttony* she must learn that the terms of a contract are stronger even than the needs of the flesh. In *Lust* she must learn to be faithful to the one who pays, not to the one she loves. In *Covetousness* she must learn that a little charity is good business.

She has now learnt six lessons which are but one lesson; and yet her heart has still learnt nothing. She looks at those who have Pride, who are Idle, who fight injustice, who find pleasure and love spontaneously and she succumbs to *Envy*, until her sister corrects her once again. The whole of the sister's final homily has a double meaning—from her own mouth it expresses her own ugly philosophy, but through the music (which takes its cue from the words "We are all born free") it becomes an outspoken condemnation of what has been said and done. The terrifying transformation of the march theme after the words *vor dem Ende Bang!* is one of those apocalyptic moments which came naturally to a composer who was in a real sense a religious artist.

Like almost all of Weill's works of the period 1928-1933, *The Seven Deadly Sins* partakes of the nature of ritual and the Morality Play (especially of the mediaeval *Totentanz*). Although from the social point of view its tendency and its moods seem to suggest a Twilight of the Bourgeois Gods (the Wagnerian reference is not irrelevant) it had a wider meaning for Weill. Coming as it did at the very moment of exile, after a five-year period of intense activity (during the previous two and a half years Weill had composed a cantata, an oratorio, a school opera, a grand opera, and a large-scale Drama-with-music), *The Seven Deadly Sins* has something of the character of an Epilogue. In this work Weill summarises with the utmost clarity and concision his attitude to a problem which had occupied him for many years—the corruption of innocence in modern society. In view of his lifelong distaste for city life and salon culture, it is ironic that he should have composed such a work in the Paris that was so alien to him. Homeless as he was, the fatal journeying of the two sisters took on a special significance, and the shade of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, seems to watch with an angry eye the chronicle of their return to a home that was moral damnation.

Weill never returned to Germany, never again set the German language, never again collaborated with Brecht, and wrote only one more work in the idiom which had been his unique means of communication with his fellow Germans. *The Seven Deadly Sins* was also a special offering for Lotte Lenya. Weill's solution of the general problems of incorporating an untrained voice in an extended work, and the particular problems of integrating Lenya's unique timbre and dramatic character with the orchestra and with other singers is comparable in some respects to Britten's reconciliation of children's music and adult music. It is a task undertaken with loving care.

This is an age embarrassed by romanticism, and Weill's reputation, like that of more than one greater composer, has suffered from that embarrassment. For a time, an easy escape from the disturbing intensity of his romanticism was found by passing off every gesture as parody. Today we would not be so rash, for parody is a device emptied of all humane comment, and humanity is the essence of Weill's art. Those who merely hear parody in *Gluttony* have heard nothing. Those who find it one of music's rare opportunities for genuine and warm laughter (not at the expense of the dignity of music) have heard a lot. Those who start by laughing and then discover in their laughter a certain pain, a searching pathos, have heard it all.