

Portraits and Snapshots

(Weill has his Photograph Taken)

In the beginning was a Karsh photo. The year was 1946, the time early autumn, the place, Weill's and Lenya's Hudson Valley home. Dressed in a comfortable tweed jacket and white shirt with polka-dot tie, the composer is sitting at what could be his own work-table. In front of him is a sheet of manuscript paper, though it is only recognisable as such in the better reproductions, and only legible in the best of them. The manuscript is an inked fair copy of a passage – not a crucial one – from the voice-and-piano score of *Street Scene*, his current work-in-progress. On that same table, perhaps, the orchestral score would soon be occupying him, day and night, often for 10 to 12 hours at a stretch, until the calamitous December try-out in Philadelphia; and then, on and off (thanks to necessary revisions), until the successful January opening on Broadway.

Weill's hands – already noticed for their size and character by the most distinguished of Karsh's predecessors – are engaged in the task of balancing a pencil on its sharpened point, close to the bottom stave of the manuscript. From this decorative but unprofitable endeavour, and also from the camera itself, Weill looks away, towards the left and into the middle distance. Although the thrust of his chin seems uncharacteristic, and has indeed been emphasised by some artful re-touching of the negative, it has no bearing on the message of eyes or mouth. The expression is neither strong nor weak, friendly nor unfriendly, thoughtful nor vacant: it suggests nothing so much as the courteous and attentive 'chairmanship' (for such was the language of the day) of an unavoidable though not disagreeable mid-town board-meeting.

The background has been blacked out, leaving two glimmers of artificial light emerging at neck-and-shoulder level. There is nothing else to disturb the studied calm, the resolute neutrality, the sheer normality of the portrait. Where exactly does its balance lie? Weill is not doodling: his right hand keeps the pencil vertical and motionless; the left steadies it horizontally.

Such, indeed, was the kind of understanding Weill established with the original author of *Street Scene*, Elmer Rice – not least, and perhaps above all, with regard to the engagement of Langston Hughes

as co-author of the lyrics. Hughes was the first black poet Weill had worked with, and already politically significant by virtue of his considerable contribution to more than one aspect of the still embryonic civil rights movement (where only the gender politics remained almost as they stood in Walt Whitman's time). Rice, for his part, was a lifelong and ardent democrat, who from that standpoint was a fierce opponent of McCarthyism and one whose socialist sympathies were never dissembled. *Street Scene* in its original form for the spoken theatre dated from the same era as Weill's Mahagonny opera and *Happy End* music. But after two tumultuous decades, the old *Street Scene* needed new points of entry and egress, and a different balance between them. Here, music and the thrust of it could prove decisive.

The image of Weill as shy and self-effacing was dear to some who were nearest to him, but is hardly borne out by the Karsh portrait. It is, moreover, flatly contradicted by the very choice of photographer. Only five years earlier, at the grimmiest period in World War II, a portrait of Winston Churchill by the hitherto little-known Canadian-Armenian photographer Yousuf Karsh had captured the imagination of countless millions thanks to the precision and immediacy with which it evoked the so-called bulldog-spirit. In March 1946, just a few months before Karsh's session with Weill, the same Winston Churchill had delivered in Fulton, Missouri, the epoch-making address that introduced the notion of an Iron Curtain stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic, and had thus anticipated, without actually announcing, what soon became known as the Cold War.

Though eminently a product of its time, the Karsh portrait of Weill retained its sovereignty for at least four decades. This, after all, was how Weill had wished to present himself to his public, his colleagues, and his backers, during the last years of his life. This, in short, was official.

As such, however, it had remained unique only until the mid-1950s, when Lotte Lenya and her second husband, the novelist and editor George Davis, began their dedicated promotion of Weill and his music. With

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Lenya's full support, Davis had resurrected – and may well have discovered, thanks to his past experience as editor of *Vanity Fair* and fiction-editor of *Harper's Bazaar* – a remarkable picture of Weill, apparently taken backstage in the Manhattan Opera House in November 1935, two months after his arrival in the USA to supervise rehearsals for *The Eternal Road*. The work of one of the finest inter-war photographers, George Hoyningen-Huene, it shows a Weill quite unrecognizable from the Karsh portrait: hooded, alien, inscrutable. Coldly, the eyes look downwards, to the right. Here too, hands and arms dominate the foreground. They are not conciliatory or playful: hirsute, the right hand is resting, dangerously; the left is cupped over the left ear as if to contain and deepen some inner silence. The shadow it casts from forehead to chin is also a seal for mouth and lips.

Gravid but not monumental, Hoyningen-Huene's widely circulated and long-familiar version of Weill represents the hidden ear and left-side brain of the composer so graphically that it seems to presuppose its complementary half. In her chosen and heroic role as Weill's widow, Lenya saw the portrait in terms of Rodin's *The Thinker*. But his Thinker can be seen from every side, whereas in Lenya's lifetime the 'other half' of the Central European Weill was thought to be Karsh's central-Manhattan chairperson. Thus did the notion of 'Two Weills' – the low-lying European intellectual, the high-flying Broadway achiever – acquire visual currency.

Eventually and fortunately, the preconceptions began to crumble and confusion set in: without explanatory caption or perceived need for one, Karsh's Weill would benignly confront an audience for *The Seven Deadly Sins*, while Huene's would be recruited as a formidable night watchman for *Street Scene*. There was a certain justice in that; but it was not poetic.

Entirely missing ten or twenty years ago was the wide-angle vision of today, and the insights it affords. How effortlessly a random selection of snapshots from the 1940s can now demonstrate that Karsh's official portrait was at best a fiction: a convenient one to be sure, but none the less dependent upon an artful pose that had been accepted or even suggested by

a sitter who knew where he stood but found it hard to see himself as some might wish to or others did.

The evidence that Karsh understood the problem is irrefutable. Significantly overlooked at the time of the *Street Scene* premiere, despite its prominent publication in an international weekly, a second portrait from the same session in Weill's home is revelatory.

Instead of blanket filters and moth-holes of artificial illumination, there are deep and natural shadows concealing nothing essential; and also sufficient light to



Weill at home in Brook House, 1946

revealeverything that really matters. Weill is standing beside the stone stairway leading from the ground level of his converted farmhouse. A large open book lies on one of the steps, and the page nearest to him is held down by an oval paper-weight.

The wind is blowing from that book', observed The 13-Year-Old as his Rabbi opened The Book of Jeremiah and began the first recitative in Act IV of Weill's and Werfel's biblical epic *The Path of The Promise* (*Der Weg der Verheissung* – later to become *The Eternal Road*). The book Weill is examining in the Karsh photograph is not entirely unrelated to the Rabbi's Old Testament. For it is an atlas, and before many months Weill will travel

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to Palestine to visit his parents (who had not seen him for twelve years). There he would be received, unofficially and therefore unphotographed, by Chaim Weizmann, who a year later would be nominated by the new State of Israel as its first President. Whether Karsh, with a focal eye on the 20th-century Armenian tragedies and diasporas, was given some inkling of Weill's eastward thoughts, or whether he simply divined them, his image of Weill by the stone stairway is as truthful as his 'famous' image, for whatever reason, is mendacious.

Some years before this notable rediscovery, a handsome volume entitled *The Photographic Art of Hoyningen-Huene* had afforded a comparable revelation: at the time of the premiere of *The Seven Deadly Sins* in Paris in June 1933, Hoyningen-Huene had portrayed a Weill far removed from the almost Kafka-esque Jeremiah of November 1935. Thoughtfully alert and forward-looking, he is equally remote from the quiescent figure in the official Karsh portrait. But how close he already seems to Karsh's atlas-reader! These are not two Weills but one, and the thirteen years that separate them seem of less account than a single ocean-crossing.

The lessons are clear even before we begin to explore the great wealth of portraits and snapshots assembled in recent years. Whether as musician or as human being,



Weill and Brecht, 1928

Weill has many appearances but few, if any, disguises.

As for his collaborations, the pictorial records may still seem disproportionately meagre. Not a single shot of Weill and Brecht face-to-face during the heyday of their collaboration had emerged from the archives on either side of the Berlin Wall by the mid-1980s. But in 1966 Ernst-Josef Auffericht had recalled in his memoirs a relevant 'scene' between composer and author during the rehearsals for his December 1931 production of the *Mahagonny* opera in Berlin. According to his account, a press photographer who had snapped Weill and Brecht at one of the rehearsals was promptly deprived of his camera; and not by Weill.

Be that as it may, the momentous events and petty coincidences of the times were to bring Weill and Brecht together again for *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Of that reunion, or of the later one in New York in 1935, there seem to be no photographic records; nor are there any from the days that Brecht and Ruth Berlau spent with Weill and Lenya at their Hudson Valley home in 1943, planning a new collaboration that never materialized.

But now, the scene is quite transformed: newly discovered, a mere sixteen seconds of silent film-footage from the late 1920s tell us more about the real nature and balances of the collaboration than many a tome. There's no sense to be made of the famous tensions if the countervailing attractions are not recognised and understood. To the lens of the film-camera on that particular occasion, the attractions were wholly recognisable.

Would that there were even half as much footage of Weill with any of his other collaborators, earlier or later. Of Weill in conversation with Kaiser, Neher, or Yvan Goll – or even with such prospective and renowned collaborators as Cocteau, Thornton Wilder, or Tennessee Williams – not so much as a blurred snapshot seems to have survived. Only with Maxwell Anderson is the pictorial record ample enough to do some justice to the spirit of a twelve-year collaboration and an even longer friendship.

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A wartime press-photo showing Weill and Anderson as air-wardens scanning the skies for enemy planes from a watch-tower above South Mountain Road has a deadpan humour all its own, given the distance from the nearest enemy air-base. It was nevertheless a contribution to the defence of the USA which they regularly and happily volunteered – how happily can be imagined from many a photo or snapshot taken when their responsibilities were less onerous: at a press conference, for instance, or round the piano.

Of all Weill's collaborations, by far the longest and least accountable was with Lenya. Thanks to the publication in 1996 of their complete extant correspondence – superbly edited and translated by Lys Symonette and Kim Kowalke, and graced with the post-Shakespearean title *Speak Low (when you speak love)* – some of the boundaries and byways of that collaboration have now been documented on the highest scholarly level. Yet there is nothing in the entire volume that is quite so simple or nearly so complex as the dust-jacket's famous photo of Lenya and Weill face-to-face and in profile. Taken in 1929 by an exceptionally gifted but unknown photographer, it has an air of almost Taoist detachment from everyday affairs. It is not the depiction of a couple, but of two strangely disparate players, one



Weill with Maxwell Anderson, 1949

of whom – but which? – is about to make another move in a chess-game that neither can win and both may lose.

Don't trust the singer, trust the song, is an old adage that writers about music and its makers do well to recall. Photographers may make of it what they will.

David Drew, 4 February 2000

The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc., is a not-for-profit, private foundation chartered to preserve and perpetuate the legacies of Kurt Weill (1900-1950) and Lotte Lenya (1898-1981). In pursuit of these goals, the Foundation maintains the Weill-Lenya Research Center to serve scholars and performers, awards grants to support excellence in research and performance, administers Weill's copyrights, and publishes (in association with European American Music Corporation) the Kurt Weill Edition. For more information on the worldwide centenary celebrations of the birth of Kurt Weill (2000), contact the Foundation at (212) 505 5240, or visit its website at <http://www.kwf.org>