

## **Kurt Weill (1900–1950)**

### **Das Berliner Requiem (1928)**

Headless, armless, or simply unfinished, torsos have their special place in the history of every art and culture. Music is no exception (and opera history from Monteverdi's time to our own day has been particularly rich in them). Weill's so-called Berlin Requiem is one such torso, in which the finished yet incomplete vies with the unfinished and the mutilated. Its position among his better known works in any genre is unique.

So strange and in some respects mysterious is the story that it is hard to resist being reminded of Mozart's Requiem, despite the obvious differences of scale and stature and the striking lack of any overt connexion with the Ordinary of the Mass. True, there

was no Süßmayr in Weill's life, nor any easily identifiable Salieri. Moreover, the circumstances of the commission are clear enough, or seem to be: Weill was the youngest of the well-known composers who were commissioned in 1928 to write musical works specifically designed for radio and therefore reflecting the new medium's sense of its responsibilities towards a growing audience. The scheme—possibly the first of its kind anywhere—was sponsored by the German Broadcasting Authority (broadly speaking, the BBC's equivalent), and administered by the quasi-autonomous stations within its network. Chief among these were the stations in Berlin and Frankfurt.

From Hindemith, a native of the region, Frankfurt commissioned a concerto for organ and chamber orchestra. So why was it Frankfurt that gave the first

performance of *Das Berliner Requiem* in May 1929 under the same conductor (and the station's music director), Ludwig Rottenberg? Not, surely, because Rottenberg was Hindemith's father-in-law; nor because Weill had been involved with Hindemith and his music festival in Baden-Baden since the spring of 1927.

Conversely, why does Weill appear to have been cold-shouldered by the Berlin station, with which he had been closely and productively identified for the past four years? And in what sense is this 'secular requiem'—as Weill calls it in his introductory note—specifically connected with the German and former Prussian capital? Had he not claimed that it represents an attempt to express what 'metropolitans feel and think about death'? So why not a Frankfurt requiem? Berlin is nowhere mentioned in the text—unlike Potsdam, the Brandenburg seat of Prussian militarism and the second residence of the Wilhelminian monarchy.

The title of the cantata, Weill announced, 'is in no way intended ironically'. Immediately, another question: why suppose it had been? Because of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*? Hardly. So Berlin gets the credit, while the cantata is solemnly dedicated to Frankfurt Radio—'Dem Frankfurter Sender gewidmet', as the non-autograph copies of Weill's largely (and mysteriously) lost manuscript proclaim.

None of these questions is impenetrable. But there are knottier ones to follow. Why for instance did the usually clear-sighted Weill propose to open his cantata with a 10-minute setting of Brecht's 'Concerning the Death in the Forest' which had been premièred at the Berlin Philharmonic months before the radio commissions were even thought of? Shortly before the much-delayed première of the cantata in May 1929, he came to his senses—or was brought to them—and realized that the structural problems and stylistic discrepancies were so great that the quasi-'atonal' 'Death in the Forest' would have to be removed. By that time he had already paid the price of another miscalculation on quite another level.

Although the Wilhelminian censorship had been abolished and its apparatus dismantled by the republican constitution of 1919, freedom of expression was by no means absolute. Guardians of public morality were as active as ever behind the scenes. Admittedly, the radio authority's network was in principle as well as in practice much more liberal than its Reithian counterpart. Yet it was still subject to the interference of anonymous watchdog-committees.

Recent researchers—notably the German Weill scholar Nils Grosch—have discovered that the censorship problems with *Das Berliner Requiem* were more widespread than was previously supposed, and that 'Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen'—a companion piece to Brecht's already notorious 'Legend of the Dead

Soldier'—had been one of the reasons for the postponement of the première scheduled and announced for February 1929. After several further hold-ups, Frankfurt Radio broadcast the première of the *Requiem* in May of that year, with Weill's approval but without the Potsdam march. Brecht's poem describes an anti-militarist procession whose central feature is a coffin on which has been daubed the derisive legend: 'A home for every warrior!'. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, just such a slogan might have appeared in the election manifesto of almost any German centre-right or centre-left party of the day. Ten years later, rumours of secret rearmament were rife, and unlike the legend of an undefeated German army 'stabbed in the back', housing programmes to woo the votes of returning soldiers were clearly a thing of the past. Few if any watchdog committees in the German radio system would have been without some busybody waiting to pounce on just a provocation.

During the early months of 1929 Weill had resumed work on the third act of his *Mahagonny* opera. Soon after the *Requiem*'s solitary performance – which was not relayed by the Berlin station – he told his publishers to postpone the planned publication, as he had decided to remove his post-Mahlerian setting of Brecht's well-known poem 'You cannot help a dead man' and incorporate it in the finale of *Mahagonny*. In the original version of the *Requiem* it had constituted a non-religious reply to the quasi-mystical rituals of 'Death in the Forest', just as the 'Potsdam march' was meant to be heard as an activist response to the secularized Passion described in the two 'Reports on the Unknown Soldier'. The *Requiem* had now lost its first two numbers (according to the original plan), and the Potsdam march had lost its non-political but stylistically related counterpart. In the three years that remained before Hitler's seizure of power, the fate of the *Requiem* had less to do with the deteriorating political and economic circumstances than with Weill's preoccupation with major new projects and his consequent prevarication with regard to a definitive form and function for the cantata. In unknown circumstances, the autograph, and all copies, of the orchestral score of the 'Potsdam' number were lost or destroyed.

In 1967 the writer of this note prepared a performing version of the *Requiem* that attempted—on the basis of existing material and knowledge—a musically and structurally defensible compromise. Performed quite frequently in live and broadcast concerts, and commercially recorded several times, the 1967 version has not been subject to any experimental revision until shortly before the performance given in January 2000 during the course of the BBC's highly successful Weill weekend at the Barbican Centre. Even before that performance it was agreed that further

experiments must follow, with the same two-fold objective: musically and structurally acceptable solutions of the inter-related problems arising from the 'Potsdam' number and the 'Great Chorale of Thanksgiving' ('Grosser Dankchoral').

Contemporary with the 1967 edition but not included in it was an orchestration of 'Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen' made by Walter Goehr on the basis of the original piano-vocal reduction. Fortunately, the musician responsible for the 1929 reduction had identified such instrumental details as the low bells in the opening funeral-march texture, and the celesta part which adorns the doubly ironic C major conclusion. The latter is crucial: it mimics the second of the two carillons commissioned in 1797 by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia for the bell tower of Potsdam's baroque Garrison Church. Chiming at the half-hour, in reply to 'Lobet den Herrn' at the hour, the secular carillon was not only the sovereign's personal choice, but a reflection of popular taste: for the tune was none other than Papageno's 'Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen', a 'hit' ever since its first performance six years earlier. Furnished with a new text extolling virtues of honesty and loyalty that were hardly foreign to the world of *The Magic Flute*, the carillon continued to be heard at hourly intervals until the church was destroyed in a British air-raid shortly before the Nazi surrender in 1945.

Double-coded as it is, the celesta's Mozartian message is immediately obliterated by the brute force and music-hall farcicality of the wind orchestra's C major cadence. F minor having been the 'home' key in every sense (including that of the slogan on the coffin), C major has at last emerged from the modulatory scheme like the Potsdam constables in their green uniforms—as authoritarian dominant or dominant authority. Pure satire in the tradition of Heine, the gesture matches the popular image of Weill. Yet it would have been wholly at odds with his own description of the *Requiem* as a 'serious and un-ironic succession of memorials, epitaphs, and dirges (Totenlieder)' had the march been included in the version as broadcast in May 1929. The march is certainly ironic, but by no means unserious. But neither as a whole nor as a torso can the *Requiem* logically end with this kind of C major, or the truncheons that reinforce it.

Hence the concluding and profoundly serious 'Great Thanksgiving Chorale'. Whereas Brecht's poem uses the language and tone of Martin Luther for a systematic denial of Christianity's redemptive message, Weill meticulously avoids the Lutheran tradition so clearly evoked—only four months earlier—in the chorale that ends *Die Dreigroschenoper*. In view of the markedly neo-Bachian character of the baritone's recitative and aria in the 'Second Report on the Unknown Soldier'—

compare for instance the bass recitative in Bach's cantata 'Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange?'—the 'Thanksgiving Chorale' could hardly be further removed from the worlds of Bach and Mozart, both of which were to be reflected in *Mahagonny*. Pre-Christian in a way that Stravinsky would have appreciated precisely because the musical language is not at all Stravinskian, the Chorale is also exceptionally far-sighted. Whether or not it contains some premonition of the paganism which would become Nazi Germany's official religion in just over four years time, it also and more significantly examines the black holes in its telescoped and modally estranged harmony as if they contained some clue to the expanding universe.

The final vocal melisma on the word 'sterben' (die) comes to rest on the barest of open fifths. If they can be heard as a skeletal rendering of the already ambiguous harmony with which the guitar had begun the *Ballad of the Drowned Girl*, the *Requiem* may in theory reconstitute itself as an endless loop once it has been recognized and salvaged as a torso. In practice—even in electronic practice—such a solution would squander a priceless asset. For the tension between the Chorale's speculative openness and inconclusive finality is characteristic of the *Requiem* itself, whether as the whole it was once imagined to be or as the torso it became.

In that sense, the open-endedness of the Chorale is consistent with Weill's setting of the words 'ruhe sanft' at the end of the brief tenor solo that follows the *Ballad of the Drowned Girl* and precedes the *Requiem's* secularized *Dies Irae*. Even as the chorus is singing 'rest in peace' the music identifies a wish that would only have been fulfillable in the context and faith of a traditional *Agnus Dei*. In the version of the tenor solo whose unpolitical text commemorates an innocent girl abused by men, the latent catholicism of the 'ruhe sanft' is not derided (though the instrumentation might suggest otherwise, designed as it was for the microphone technology of 1928 rather than for the ears of today). In the alternative and highly political text—which was not the one broadcast by Frankfurt Radio—the commemorated victim was one who would never rest in peace.

'Die rote Rosa' is Rosa Luxemburg, co-founder of the German Spartacus League and as such, a fiery opponent of the 1914–18 war. In January 1919 her partly decomposed body was discovered in Berlin's Landwehr canal, where it had been flung by the army officers who had apprehended and brutally mistreated her. Although their identities were well known, they were never brought to trial. Justice is among the unnamed victims mourned by a *Requiem* whose true 'end' may also serve as its false beginning. Poised midway between the 1918 Armistice and the outbreak of World War 2, the *Requiem* expressly repudiates the

afterlife as if better to train its eyes on near and distant futures. Only four years after the 'Potsdam march' was suppressed, the aged President Hindenburg would receive a soberly dressed and statesmanlike Hitler at the doorway of Potsdam's Garrison Church. Such was the opening ceremony in the Day of Potsdam, held on 21 March 1933 in celebration of Hitler's victory. Early on that same day, Weill had left Berlin by car, and headed for France; and well before the Day of Potsdam had reached its appointed climax—a massive torchlight parade in front of that ultimate symbol of Prussian militarism, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin—Weill was safely across the French border. A few days later, the Mozartian carillon proclaiming 'loyalty and honesty' from the bell-tower of Potsdam's Garrison Church was adopted by the Propaganda Minister's radio network as one of its station call-signs.

So much for Potsdam and the relatively near future. From the higher vantage-point of the Arc de Triomphe and the tomb of France's Unknown Soldier, June 1940

and Hitler's triumphal procession up the Champs Elysées towards the Napoleonic arch and its tomb become, with hindsight, clearly discernable. 'Berlin Requiem' had been from the start a strangely anodyne title for a work that might well have been conceived in 1928 as a Potsdam requiem and completed in Paris in 1933 as a German one. Yet its timeless authenticity has always depended on the fragmentary form in which it was left, and will always be weakened by any attempt to mould the fragment into the likeness of a finished work. The severed head of the Potsdam march was still singing in the autumn of 1989, when demonstrators in their tens of thousands paraded peacefully through the streets of Leipzig in protest against the corrupt and oppressive Communist regime. Emblazoned on their banners were libertarian slogans culled from the officially sacrosanct works of Rosa Luxemburg.