

Thursday 22 October

Kurt Weill (1900–1950)

**Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments,
Op. 12**

1 Andante con moto

2 Notturmo: Allegro un poco tenuto –

Cadenza: Moderato – Serenata: Allegretto

3 Allegro molto, un poco agitato

The Concerto was composed in Berlin in April–May 1924. Although written for Joseph Szigeti, it was first performed by Marcel Darrieux in Paris on 11 June 1925. During the 1920s it became the most widely performed of Weill's instrumental works. It was also the first of them to be revived a quarter of a century later, when interest in his European achievements was reawakened.

If, as Adorno remarked, the Weill Concerto 'stands isolated and alien: that is, in the right place', it is because of conflicts peculiar to Weill and his historical situation. The first clue to the nature of these conflicts is the marvellous *tranquillo* episode shortly before the end of the first movement. Here Weill speaks for the first time in affectionate and intimate tones; and, as he recalls, almost in Pierrot's sense, the fragrance of 'far-off days', the movement's scarred and desolate landscape fades from view, and the recurrent warnings of the *Dies irae* are momentarily forgotten. The coda is a brief and gentle reminder of the earlier convulsions.

The three interlinked nocturnes that form the central movement effect a transition towards a warmer, southern climate. But even in the *tarantella* finale there is a sense of hunter and hunted, of an escape that is sought but not found – except inwardly, towards the end, in a passage of rapt meditation analogous to the first movement's *tranquillo* episode. This time, however, it is not the past and its fragrance that seems to be recalled, so much as the north and its forest murmurs; and this time, the toccata-like coda is extensive and anything but gentle. Relentlessly, it marshals the troops whose distant *reveilles* were heard in the central cadenza movement. The orchestra's threatening interjection near the end strikingly anticipates the *Happy End* chorus 'Geht hinein in die Schlacht' ('March ahead to fight').

David Drew [1983/92]

Kurt Weill

Symphony No. 2

1 Sostenuto – Allegro molto 2 Largo

3 Allegro vivace – Presto

Whereas Weill's First Symphony (1921), with its expressly religious, socialist, and pacifist message (and its unacknowledged debt to the Schoenberg of the First Chamber Symphony), had been an impassioned reaction to the First World War and its revolutionary aftermath, his seemingly neo-classical and 'abstract' Second is musically so far removed from its predecessor that the absence of any metaphysical or mystical aspirations is more apparent than the essential links which it still preserves.

The First Symphony had ended darkly and in C minor, after an epilogue indicating that the social and spiritual revolution promised earlier has not in fact been achieved; the Second begins even more darkly in an adjacent yet ambiguous tonal field, with an introduction that looks beyond the *Sturm und Drang* of the first movement – composed in Berlin in January 1933, shortly before the Nazi seizure of power and Weill's flight to France – and already envisages the two consequences of that turbulent movement: first the massive *cortège* of the slow movement – composed in Parisian exile later that same year – and then the phantoms of the rondo finale, with its marches and counter-marches, and its demented *tarantella* coda (harking back to the finale of his own Violin Concerto and thence to Busoni's Piano Concerto).

Bruno Walter, who conducted the first performances of the Second Symphony in Amsterdam (Concertgebouw Orchestra, 11 October 1934) spoke of its 'tragic-ironic' tone, and tried in vain to extract from the composer a title or subtitle that would give some clue as to the programmatic content. Both in his response to Walter and in his own programme note, Weill denied that there was any such content. But the music, and the circumstances of its composition, suggest otherwise.

Today, listeners coming to the Symphony for the first time but with some knowledge of other representative works of the early 1930s – for instance, *Der Silbersee* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* – are unlikely to be as puzzled as Walter (or indeed as uncomprehendingly hostile as the Dutch and American critics, who unanimously dismissed the work as tasteless and inane). On the other hand, those new

to Weill at any stage may be disconcerted and even alarmed by the apparent simplicity of a music that is in its own inimitable way just as 'German' as Hindemith's or Pfitzner's, and yet contrives to sound at first hearing almost as mellifluous as, say, the Poulenc of *Les biches*.

Simple melodies and triadic harmonies belie the fact that it is in the deepest sense a dissonant music, and indeed intensively so. Moreover, analysis reveals that its real affinities are not with the music of any contemporaries (except, perhaps, and accidentally, with Shostakovich). Rather do they begin with the Haydn of the middle years, and continue through Mozart to Schubert and thence to Mahler. But the first movement's 'false reprise' (for example), the second's motivic processes (culminating in the hammer blows following its last and agonized climax), and the finale's strictly thematic shadow-play and self-mockery in relation to the tragedy of the slow movement – these have only to be heard to be believed. Analysis comes later.

Kurt Weill (1900–1950)

String Quartet in B minor (1918)

*1 Mässig 2 Allegro ma non troppo (in heimlich erzählendem Tod) 3 Langsam und innig
4 Durchaus lustig und wild, aber nicht zu schnell*

Members of the Britten–Pears Ensemble

Begun in 1917, the Quartet was composed partly in Weill's home town of Dessau and partly in Berlin during his brief period of study with Humperdinck at the Hochschule für Musik. Apart from juvenilia (including at least one 'opera') it was his first extended work. Although he did not give it an opus number, or take account of it when he wrote his 'official' First Quartet (Op. 8) in 1923, he thought well enough of it to show it to Hermann Scherchen in 1919, and to offer it for public performance (but not, as far as we know, for publication).

While there is evidence that the work was accepted

with enthusiasm by a quartet from the Hagen City Orchestra, and duly rehearsed for an unspecified première, there is no evidence that it was actually performed in that turbulent and economically chaotic post-war period. The modern première was given at the 1975 Berlin Festival by the Melos Quartet of Stuttgart. Since then the work has been commercially recorded, and is performed no less frequently than the opus 8 Quartet (to which, despite its obvious immaturity, some authorities prefer it).

Although in later years Weill was to reject Humperdinck and his Wagnerian ethos (which to some extent had been his own) it is clear that the old man liked and admired the last of his composition pupils, and treated him kindly. Weill for his part had reason to be grateful to him, and not only because of his innocent flirtation (it is said) with the venerable master's youngest and prettiest daughter.

Humperdinck's only known contribution to the Quartet was a suggestion that the finale should be fugal – though not, one hopes, that it should also be in the awkward key of B major. While the fugue subject itself certainly acknowledges its family connections with Wagner's Siegfried and its professional ones with Sachs and indeed Beckmesser, the Quartet as a whole inclines in quite other directions: the first movement, for instance, owes something to the 'classical' Reger, whom the young Weill held in high regard; and by way of a chance allusion to the so-called 'Alma' theme (which Weill surely didn't know of at that time) it also foretells his lifelong love of Mahler.

The ensuing scherzo is playfully spooky, almost as if Weill were introducing the ghost of Mendelssohn to his future teacher, Busoni. (Material from this movement was later to be incorporated in his score for the *Nutcracker*-like children's 'pantomime' *Zaubernacht*, which was successfully staged in Berlin and New York, and generously praised by Busoni).

The number of Weillian fingerprints is perhaps greater in the scherzo than in the first movement but, even so, it hardly prepares us for the pleasant shock of hearing Weill's Broadway hit *Lady in the Dark* foreshadowed at the start of the slow movement, and *Knickerbocker Holiday* in the operetta-like slow waltz that forms a bridge from the slow movement to the fugal finale. The most characteristic event in the entire work, and also the crowning one, is, however, the finale's extraordinary return to, and transformation of, the waltz music. It is here that Weill for the first time,

and more in the tradition of Schubert than of Mahler, unabashedly associates material of popular, not to say vulgar, origin with that *Innigkeit* (inwardness) which was part of his heritage from German Romanticism.

David Drew

The cycle dates from the summer of 1923, and was begun in the German town of Heide on 29 June. Originally Weill had planned to link the songs with interludes, and these – to judge from the only surviving sketch – may have been intended to heighten the dance character of the work, perhaps with a view to facilitating choreographic interpretation. But even in its present purely vocal form, *Frauentanz* was produced in a dance version soon after its concert première in Berlin in January 1924 (soloist Nora Pisling-Boas, conductor Fritz Stiedry). One of the best liked of his early concert works, and one of the first to be heard

outside Germany, *Frauentanz* belongs to the modern tradition of song-cycles with small ensemble, and takes its place in the line of succession from Stravinsky (rather than Ravel on the one hand or Schoenberg on the other) via the young Hindemith. Weill is known to have admired the latter's early instrumental cycles, and may also have been familiar with those of Darius Milhaud. Only in the final song does a distant echo of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* reveal the sources of the Romanticism latent in, or audibly held in check by, the deliberate coolness and erotic playfulness of the earlier numbers.

David Drew [1990]

A year after Gershwin's death, Weill and Maxwell Anderson returned from a quite different angle to the vein of satire Gershwin had explored in the trio of operetta-like shows, *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. George and Ira Gershwin's acknowledged debt to Gilbert and Sullivan was in some small measure inherited by Anderson, but Shavian models were at least as important to him. Weill for his part took up from where he left off in *Der Kuhhandel* (1934), the brilliant but ill-fated post-Offenbach satire on dictators and the armaments industry which he wrote with the Hungarian-German author Robert Vambery. (Vambery and Weill in effect parted company after the failure in London of a garbled version of *Der Kuhhandel*; but Vambery too settled in the USA, and in 1941 he was assistant director in the first production of Britten's and Auden's *Paul Bunyan*.)

There is some evidence of ideological tension between Anderson, who conceived *Knickerbocker Holiday* as a light-hearted but ultimately serious and critical warning to the Roosevelt Administration in the name of the Founding Fathers, and Weill who took a

more European view while at the same time affirming his American loyalties, his antipathy to war, and (in one song derived from *Davy Crockett*) his instinctive sympathy with the New Deal which Anderson was meanwhile decrying. Such tensions, as Weill well knew, could be creatively stimulating: no wonder he sometimes makes Pieter Stuyvesant sing with a German rather than a Dutch accent – but never with Roosevelt's patrician American one.

This evening's selection of numbers represents about one-third of the score, and is determined partly by the forces available and partly by the points at which *Knickerbocker Holiday* (which Britten could never have heard or seen, though the vocal score was published) comes closest to the world of *Paul Bunyan*.

It is never, of course, very close; but the distance would seem much greater if the American idioms of *Paul Bunyan* were contrasted with Weill's more overtly Broadway-style numbers, and doubly so if Weill's highly personal treatment of a standard (reedy) Broadway orchestra were contrasted with Britten's equally characteristic writing for a more traditional orchestra.

After his early and not undistinguished part-time career as a *Lieder* accompanist Weill seems to have lost interest in any combination of voices and piano, and his own vocal scores are simply sketches for the full score. *Knickerbocker Holiday* was, however, published in a professional 'reduction' for voices and piano. With supporting elaboration improvised from the full score, the solo-piano vocal score provides the 'text' for this evening's selections. The numbers will be performed in order of their appearance in the complete score. The following brief synopsis is accordingly slanted towards them. Their titles appear in bold face.

The setting is Manhattan Island in 1647. Washington Irving, as 'chorus' evokes the scene – the Battery at first light, with Dutch maidens washing the steps (**Clickety-Clack**). He goes on to comment mockingly on the **Entrance of the Council**. Idle, inefficient, and corrupt as they all are, the Councillors are informed by the peg-legged Pieter Stuyvesant that henceforth he will take charge of everything – including their illicit dealings. He appoints Councillor Tienhoven as his pay-off man, and is delighted when Tienhoven offers him the hand of his daughter Tina. 'What a horrible idea,' exclaims Tina, taking issue with the Council in the waltz ensemble **Young People Think about Love**.

Ignoring the fervent support she has won from the other Dutch girls, Stuyvesant proposes in **September Song** to exercise his prerogatives (and his charm) as a man of power and long experience. Finally, he demonstrates that power in another and strictly demagogic sense (**All Hail the Political Honeymoon**).

But Tina is unshakeably in love with Brom Broek, a penniless yet cheerful knife-grinder who soon emerges as the chief representative of democratic opposition to Stuyvesant. He tells the would-be dictator what he thinks of him, and is promptly clapped in gaol. (Brom's and Tina's duet, 'We are cut in twain', will be heard at the close of this evening's programme.)

Act II begins with Stuyvesant exercising his army and demonstrating that whereas in parade formation the recruits are led by the great and the good – meaning the Council – in battle the reverse obtains, since it is the hapless Boys who must face the bullets first (**To War!**). Meanwhile Brom has escaped from prison, and is playing on the suspicions of the Councillors. Venal blockheads though they are, they begin to question Stuyvesant's New Order, and wonder, in slow waltz-time, whether his monopoly in graft, extortion and chicanery might not constitute a fatal erosion of their 'democratic' rights (**Our Ancient Liberties**).

Soon, the Army of New Amsterdam is engaged in battle with the Indians from Harlem. Brom's best friend, Tenpin, is killed (**Dirge for a Soldier**). 'The truth about a dead soldier', Brom tells Stuyvesant, 'is usually that he died young, in an unnecessary war, because of the stupidity or ambition of those in office. It was so in this case.' He points out that the firearms and the booze acquired by the Indians were sold to them by the Governor himself.

Undeterred by Tina's protestations, and her desperate hints that she may be carrying Brom's child, Stuyvesant orders the Councillors to hang Brom forthwith. But they rebel (**No, Ve Wouldn't Gonto Do It**). Finally, Washington Irving himself steps into his own story, to remind Stuyvesant that none of his actions or decisions will escape the judgement of posterity. An instant convert to democracy, the Governor introduces the recommended reforms, and graciously consents to the marriage of Brom and Tina.

When Britten met Weill (and Anderson) for the first and only time in August 1940, Weill had virtually finished the composition of *Lady in the Dark*, and was far advanced with its orchestration; as for Britten, he had been planning *Paul Bunyan* with Auden since the end of the previous year, and its première was to follow in May 1941. After the sensational success of *Lady in the Dark* (Broadway opening, 23 January 1941), Weill bought his first real home in America – Brook House, a converted farmhouse in Rockland County – and began to search for new material. After so big a ‘hit’, it was, paradoxically, a difficult time for him. There is no record that he ever knew of the letter Georg Kaiser – his first librettist, and second father-figure after Busoni – had written to his American agent

from his lonely exile in Switzerland. It was dated 7 July and was written in reply to the agent's suggestion that he renew his collaboration with Weill. Kaiser reported that he had just read Melville's *Billy Budd*, and that when he reached the final ballad, 'I feel it stealing now', he became convinced that it must become a 'play with music', and moreover that 'this music should be written by Kurt Weill'.

By the time Britten and Pears sailed for England, in the spring of 1942, Weill was still searching in vain for the right material and the right producer for another Broadway show. His final and successful choice was the novella *The Tinted Venus*, by the British author F. J. Anstey; the producer of his musical version was to be Cheryl Crawford. But another year's frustration followed before *One Touch of Venus* – his second hit show – took its final shape.

Unlike Britten, Weill showed little interest in the cabaret medium as such, and after his very early days, wrote nothing significant for it. All his finest strophic songs were composed for the theatre. Apart from Tina's and Brom's duet, 'We are cut in twain', and the *Johnny Johnson* numbers, all the Weill numbers in this part of the programme are drawn from the through-composed dream sequences in *Lady in the Dark*.

The songs and choruses for the comedy *Happy End* were composed in Berlin, Munich, and the South of France during the summer of 1929, before Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann had finished the play. Some of the song texts (including 'Surabaya Johnny', which had already been set to music by F. Bruinier) predate the play, and none is closely integrated with its dramatic context.

Weill's main inducement was an opportunity to develop the 'song style' which he had evolved in *Die Dreigroschenoper* but which he realized was not a suitable basis for continuous musical structures. *Happy End* is thus in marked contrast to the cantatas *Das Berliner Requiem* and *Der Lindberghflug*, which preceded it, and the school opera *Der Jasager*, which followed it.

The première of *Happy End* ended in an uproar. Provoked by the sudden intrusion of Agitprop methods in the final scene of an (apparently) commercial gangster comedy, the opposition was intensified by the musical finale, 'Hosianna Rockefeller'. The press was uniformly hostile to the play, and the production closed within a fortnight. With only two notable exceptions – T. W. Adorno and Max Marschalk – the critics who had admired the *Dreigroschenoper* music were apparently unable to discern the strikingly fresh inspiration and more versatile techniques of the *Happy End* score.

Four years after the failure of the first production – at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm on 2 September 1929 (with Carola Neher as Lilian, Helene Weigel as Die Dame in Grau, Peter Lorre as Dr Nakamura, Oskar Homolka as Bill and Kurt Gerron as Sam) – Weill considered rescuing the score from oblivion by preparing a 'Songspiel' version with Brecht. But he was distracted by another commitment and then by the problems of emigration.

The 'Song sequence' performed tonight was devised by the present writer for concert performance, and has no dramatic connotations. It includes all the musical numbers. Their order is determined by two coordinates: the musical need for balance and contrast (voices, tonality, character, etc.) and the obligation to relate all juxtapositions to the content and function of the texts.

David Drew [1986]