

Kurt Weill (1900–50)**The Silver Lake – A Winter's
Fairy Tale (1932)**

Olim	Peter Sidhom <i>baritone</i>
Severin	Heinz Kruse <i>tenor</i>
Frau von Luber	Helga Dernesch <i>mezzo-soprano</i>
Fennimore	Juanita Lascarro <i>soprano</i>
Baron Laur	Heinz Zednik <i>tenor</i>
Lottery Agent	Graham Clark <i>tenor</i>
First Shopgirl	Catrin Wyn-Davies <i>soprano</i>
Second Shopgirl	Katarina Karnéus <i>mezzo-soprano</i>
First Gravedigger	Paul Whelan <i>baritone</i>
Second Gravedigger	Gidon Saks <i>bass-baritone</i>
First Youth	Stephen Alder <i>bass</i>
Second Youth	Andrew Weale <i>bass</i>
	Philip Franks
	Maria Friedman
	Hugh Ross

In the present version of *The Silver Lake*, the essence of Georg Kaiser's long and complex play is preserved in the form of spoken narratives (written by Jeremy Sams) and acted monologues and dialogues from the play itself. Together, these frame and link the performance of the complete musical score.

An outline of the plot concludes the following sequence of brief programme notes, each of which is self-standing and is headed accordingly. The order of reading is therefore a matter of individual choice and convenience – though the first note and last may perhaps be regarded as basic.

Origins

Der Silbersee (*The Silver Lake*) was written and composed in Berlin during the second half of 1932, and first performed in Leipzig (and simultaneously in Magdeburg and Erfurt) on 18 February 1933 – nineteen days after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and nine nights before the so-called Weimar Republic and its democratic experiment were consumed in the flames that engulfed the German parliament building (the Reichstag).

Der Silbersee was the last musical score by Weill and the last play by Georg Kaiser to be heard or staged in their native Germany until the defeat of Hitler, and also the last to have had its world premiere there during either of their lifetimes. Not for another fifty-seven years could the

theatres and opera houses of Leipzig, Erfurt and Magdeburg freely determine their own repertoires according to their own needs and convictions; and never again, perhaps, would Leipzig audiences – among them, in 1933, Weill's mother and father – include numerous representatives of a large, prosperous, and culturally influential Jewish community.

Snapshots: Germany 1929–32

Of all European countries, Germany was the worst hit by the Wall Street crash of 1929. By 1931 Germany's unemployed numbered over five million; a year later, another million had joined their ranks. Already in 1931 the flight of capital, coupled with the withdrawal of foreign credits, had led to panic on the Stock Exchange and a spate of bankruptcies. The effect on a 'welfare state' fuelled by American capital – as free-marketeters are nowadays tending rather stridently to point out – was crippling. Anticipating our own times, Franz von Papen's Centre-Right government sharply reduced social security benefits during the severe winter of 1931–2. Homelessness and hunger became widespread. In July 1932 – just after the Nazis had doubled their strength in the Reichstag elections, and just before Weill and Kaiser began work on *Der Silbersee* – a bloody battle between Nazis and Communists in the Hamburg port of Altona was soon joined by their common enemy, the Socialists.

Meanwhile the courageous and youthful opera

company in Altona was planning to stage Weill's most recent work, the three-act opera *Die Bürgschaft* ('The Pledge', or 'The Surety'). Together with his friend Caspar Neher – librettist of *Die Bürgschaft* and designer of *Der Silbersee* – Weill visited Altona during the early winter of 1932–3. While he was there he witnessed the plight of the homeless unemployed, and could compare it with that of their Berlin comrades who had built themselves rough huts by the banks of the lake close to Kaiser's home in the suburb of Grünheide – the lake across which (as legend has it) Weill in 1924 had first rowed the still unknown actress and dancer who in her final manifestation as his loyal widow Lotte Lenya would enliven many a television chat-show with the tale of that crossing. By 1932 Lenya and Weill had formally separated, and a year later they were divorced (to remarry in 1937).

Reception

The Leipzig premiere in February 1933 was given in the same venerable theatre and opera house that had been Lortzing's base in the 1830s and a major Wagner centre in the 1870s. Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* had had its world premiere there in 1906, Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* twenty-one years later, and – riotously – Weill's and Brecht's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 1930. The conductor of the Leipzig *Silbersee* – as of the Krenek and of *Mahagonny* – was Gustav Brecher; the director was Detlef Sierck (remembered today as the cult film director Douglas Sirk).

The premiere was reviewed not only by the Leipzig press but also by the leading music and drama critics from Berlin and Frankfurt. What Hans Rothe was later to call 'the last day of the greatest decade of German culture in the twentieth century' had seemed to be an unqualified success, and only the Nazi and the Moscow-line Communist press took exception to it. Neither in Leipzig nor in Magdeburg – Kaiser's native city – were there any hostile demonstrations on the first night. But in Magdeburg on the second night the thugs went to work, and within hours, all three *Silbersee* productions were doomed. Brecher was soon to be hounded from his post; and rehearsals already in progress for a highly prestigious Berlin premiere at Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater – with a prominent Nazi sympathiser in the role of Olim – were abruptly terminated.

It would be misleading to suggest that *Der Silbersee* was formally banned. In the circumstances no ban was needed: within days of the Nazi seizure of power, a production in Germany was inconceivable. Administrators, conductors and directors who might have favoured one had either lost their positions, fled abroad, or been incarcerated; unless, of course, they had already teamed up with the new authorities.

Subsequent performances

Because of the political upheavals of the time, little or no news of the *Silbersee* premiere reached

the international or the specialist press. A voice-and-piano score and a small album of the more popular numbers had been published in time for the premiere, but were not advertised or promoted after March 1933. It was in the third week of March that Weill fled from Berlin to Paris – never to return.

Five years after his death, Berlin's first production of *Der Silbersee* – and the first anywhere since 1933 – was given in a theatre too small to house an orchestra. It was not until the 1971 Holland Festival that Weill's score was heard again in its original form, interspersed – as today – with narrations and dialogue. The British premiere of the complete work was mounted by the Camden Festival in 1987.

Georg Kaiser (1878–1945)

Kaiser is a major figure in the history of German theatre, and one who had some influence on the Russian, British and American theatre of his time – chiefly through his Expressionist 'station-drama' *From Morning to Midnight*. Eclipsed as he now is, he remains an essential link between the generation of Gerhart Hauptmann and Frank Wedekind and that of Brecht. In the 1920s Brecht was a frequent visitor to the Kaisers' family home on the outskirts of Berlin; and like Weill he was accustomed to address the playwright and his wife as if they were his foster-parents. Later and with more irony he would write of 'the great gentleman Kaiser' – which was indeed one of Kaiser's favourite roles.

A consciously post-Christian didactic moralist whose affinities with Bernard Shaw were disguised by the studied artificiality of his Expressionist diction and the modernist constructivism of his dramaturgy, Kaiser won overnight fame and notoriety towards the end of the First World War with his pacifist drama *The Burghers of Calais*. Although – like the young Brecht – he was briefly involved in the revolutionary politics of post-1918 Bavaria, his hatred of militarism and his profound mistrust (or misunderstanding, as the 1990s would have it) of capitalism were tempered by a commitment to Tolstoyan non-violence. With little use for Marx and none at all for Stalin, Mussolini, or Hitler, Kaiser was a solitary and reclusive figure long before the Nazis forced him into ‘inner exile’. Escaping to Switzerland in 1938, he died there seven years later, all but forgotten.

Genre

Like *The Threepenny Opera* but much more demanding, *The Silver Lake* presupposes a cast of ‘singing actors’. Although it is likewise not an opera in the strict sense, it is audibly the work of a composer with opera projects still at the forefront of his mind. Despite and because of rapidly diminishing opportunities for them in Germany, *The Silver Lake* takes for granted the full resources of the same richly subsidised theatre and opera system in which Richard Strauss and Max Reinhardt had long been luxuriating.

The Weill of *The Silver Lake* is rooted in a tradition of musical theatre that went back to the Mozart of *The Magic Flute*, via Weber, Albert Lortzing and Wenzel Müller. He was also and equally indebted to the alternative tradition that had fostered precarious marriages between high drama and musical scores too extensive and powerful to be considered incidental. There again, Mozart was a model – the Mozart of *Thamos, King of Egypt*.

Kaiser for his part was something of a Wagnerite – again, perhaps, in Shaw’s sense – but one who was by no means averse to the rough and tumble of the commercial theatre. Incapable of writing a mere potboiler but happy to set up a stall in the market place from time to time, he followed the latest Berlin Revues much as he followed his favourite football team – avidly, coolly, mathematically.

Kaiser’s *Silver Lake* is not a play ‘with’ music, as Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann’s adaptation of *The Beggar’s Opera* was intended to be before Weill made a *Threepenny Opera* of it; it was essentially a play ‘for’ music – something that becomes vividly clear almost as soon as the prosaic and ponderous Olim breaks the silence he had magisterially preserved throughout the opening scene, and alone in the local police station, begins his bureaucratic monologue. One of the great passages in twentieth-century music theatre, the police-station scene was only conceivable through a true partnership of composer and playwright.

The Music

In 1933 neither Weill, his public, nor his critics needed any programme notes about the style, language or ‘intentions’ of his *Silbersee* music. Today, when that style and language are even more remote from contemporary art-musics and popular-musics than they once were from Stravinsky or Spoliansky, Hindemith or Hollander, the musical world seems to know a lot more about Weill and his intentions than Weill himself could possibly have known at the time.

There is, for instance, the key fact – of which he could not have had the slightest inkling – that after *Der Silbersee* his next work would be *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and that it would be written in Paris. Another unforeseeable and closely related fact was that the Symphony whose first movement he had drafted in January 1933 in Berlin – shortly before the *Silbersee* premieres – would not be finished for another year, and would wait nearly forty years for its official German premiere.

And yet it is arguable that today’s listeners to the *Silver Lake* music should envy and try to emulate the relative innocence of their predecessors sixty-three years ago. If any foreknowledge is likely to help them, it is the simple observation that from whatever direction we choose to approach it, the unity of the music has three compacted layers. The first is Weill’s highly personal transformation of popular song and dance idioms, whether of his own day or from as far back as Schubert’s. The second layer

extends directly from the post-Verdian operatic preoccupations of *Die Bürgschaft* and its predecessors; and the third is part of his inheritance, via his teacher Busoni, from the masonic rites of Mozart.

These may seem to be academic matters, yet they are more than that. As we approach the end of our century and of Weill’s too, the ‘Wheel of Time’ whose revolutions are the subject of ‘The Fool’s Paradise’ duet in *The Silver Lake*, is pressing harder and moving faster than ever. The old question of what has already been irretrievably crushed by it, and how much is about to be, has acquired a new urgency.

SYNOPSIS

The word *Wintermärchen*, meaning winter's tale (or, more strictly, fairy tale), has two distinct resonances in German. The first is from Shakespeare via Schlegel-Tieck's classic translation of *The Winter's Tale*, whose German title is *Das Wintermärchen*; the second and more specific is from Heine and his *Deutschland – Ein Wintermärchen*.

The action of *The Silver Lake* is set in an unspecified time and place, where the 'here-and-now' is so clearly an annexe to the 'once-upon-a-time, anywhere', that it would still function as such even were all memory of the German winter of 1932–3 to be lost. Of the five named figures, the three principals – Olim, Severin and Fennimore – have names suggestive of a legendary world, without national or historical connotations. But Frau von Lubber and her accomplice the Baron Laur are recognisable as part of the debris from Wilhelmian Germany, and like their successors today, are proud to bear the titles that were officially abolished in 1918.

It is winter. Severin and his four companions live in the shacks they have built in the woods surrounding the Silver Lake. Long unemployed and now destitute, they are driven by sheer hunger to raid a suburban grocery store. Having made their escape, they are already nearing the Silver Lake when two rural policemen, alerted by the sound of a hue-and-cry, try to stop them. As they take to their heels, Constable Olim fires at them, severely wounding Severin, who is duly

arrested and taken to hospital.

While preparing his report on the incident, Olim – prompted and guided by the off-stage chorus – begins to question his own role, and the very nature of law and order in a disordered society. To change the world is beyond his capacity, but to help a fellow human being is not.

Olim is interrupted in his ruminations by a Mephistophelian Lottery Agent bringing news that he is the jackpot winner and advising him to invest the proceeds on the most advantageous terms. Instead, Olim re-writes his report in Severin's favour, resigns from the police force, and purchases a remote castle which is to become Severin's private and luxurious sanatorium. In his new identity as castle-owner and benefactor, Olim visits the still delirious Severin in hospital, and assumes full responsibility for his recuperation.

Duly installed in the castle, Severin is treated like a lord, and already has a prodigious appetite. But the stronger he becomes, the more is he obsessed by the idea of tracking down the unknown policeman, and avenging himself.

Severin's behaviour is closely watched by Frau von Lubber – Olim's *châtelaine* and the erstwhile owner of the castle. Convinced that Olim has a secret, she calls in her niece Fennimore, ostensibly to care for Severin, but actually to discover all she can about him and his benefactor. But Fennimore is of quite another mind, and it is no fault of hers that Severin eventually discovers Olim's true identity. Such is Severin's rage that the terrified Olim takes refuge in an attic and there becomes easy prey to von Lubber. Having secured Olim's

Synopsis

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signature to an unread document, she believes she can safely leave the actual throat-cutting to Severin.

Even when Fennimore brings about the complete reconciliation of the two men, von Luber remains triumphant. Thrusting Fennimore out into the howling night, she swiftly silences Olim; for the document he had blindly signed conveys the castle and all his worldly goods to herself and Baron Laur.

Cast out like Fennimore before them, Olim and Severin head for the Silver Lake and the oblivion of its waters. But the disembodied voices of Fennimore and the chorus remind them of their duties to life and to each other. When at last they reach the woods beside the lake, a mighty gust of wind sweeps the snow from the trees, and reveals the green of spring. But the lake is still frozen solid. With new confidence, the two men start to cross towards the other side.

