

Struggling for Supremacy: The Libretto of *Mahagonny*

By David Drew

When news of the Weill-Brecht collaboration reached his publisher in Vienna, Emil Hertzka's first response was to warn Weill of the risks entailed in working with so individual a writer. The draft scenario of *Mahagonny*, which Weill sent him in December 1927, only confirmed his view. Hertzka told Weill that the material did not seem truly operatic. "I can set your mind at rest," replied Weill on 27 December, "if you're afraid that the piece derives in any way from the spoken theater."

After much effort, I've been so successful with Brecht that he's quite fascinated by the idea of writing a text for musical purposes. Day by day for three solid months I've worked with him on this libretto . . . and I've examined every word in terms of operatic requirements. Not for many years has there been a libretto so rigorously designed for music—and, what's more, for *my* music.¹

Weill's two published references to his literary collaboration with Brecht on *Mahagonny* were (until the mid-1980s) studiously ignored by Brecht scholars, to whom the very idea that the libretto should be a joint work seems never to have occurred.² In the Brecht literature, and consequently in the more sophisticated sectors of the theatrical press until the late 1980s, there was a tendency to describe the libretto as a "play." Not surprisingly, it has, as such, been held in low repute: from an orthodox Brechtian point of view it was better to dismiss the "play" as one of Homer's nods than to hold Weill at least equally responsible for its shortcomings and hence to suggest that the master had stooped to collaborating on a mere libretto for so questionable a composer.

After Brecht's death and the subsequent revival and recording of the opera, there were rumors that the play was about to be rescued from the poisonously bourgeois charms of its score. Sure enough, a 50-minute "stage-version" was produced in 1963 by Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and widely applauded. Although entitled "Das kleine Mahagonny—nach dem Songspiel von 1927," it was a play, or rather a burlesque based on the opera libretto, but closing with a homily by Brecht dating from 1955 and contrasting the unending fight of "all against all" under capitalism with the fight of "all for all" which had helped certain peoples to establish "a socialist economy" abundantly favorable to the cause of peace—in short, a system that would replace "horror and fear" by "joy and hope."

In that worthy cause, the Ensemble music-directors dished up a few morsels from the *Songspiel* and the opera. Doused with ketchup and stripped of any intelligent nourishment, imaginative character, or structural purpose, these fragments happily sustained the production's view of Western consumerism and capitalist prostitution, while at the same time confirming the autarchy of the spoken text.

Paradoxically, the culinary nature of the enterprise and the amount of hard work it entailed served among other things to emphasize that the untouched libretto was literally unstageable as a spoken play. In that respect at least Brecht and Weill were no match

for Brecht's early admirer Hugo von Hofmannsthal: with express permission of Strauss's heirs, *Der Rosenkavalier* has in fact been staged, intact, as a spoken play.

A "great" libretto is a contradiction in terms. Good or bad, the indispensable ones are those that have made great operas possible: whether imaginative or mechanical, poetic or prosaic, they are at least sound enough to bear the weight of the composer's musico-dramatic invention. But there are others so defective in structure, sense, or style that a Beethoven—let alone a Weber—would be powerless to save them.

The *Mahagonny* libretto is neither good nor bad, but it is inspired. Like Begbick's lorry it has lost its shock-absorbers during its long and arduous retreat from the world of law and order. Backfiring vociferously, this ramshackle vehicle leaves the Girl of the Golden West far behind and arrives in a desert where no libretto and no opera has been before. First the engine boils over, then the brakes fail and finally the tank runs dry. There in the middle of a desert, it ends its journey, and yet, risible as it appears to be and useless as it certainly would be to any future explorer of the same region, it becomes the means whereby a city of a kind, and an opera of a kind, were built.

No libretto in the history of opera is more distinctive in tone and diction. Brecht alone was responsible for that and also, of course, for the few passages of pure poetry, some of which—like some of the less sophisticated lyrics—were written before the opera was thought of.

Everything that came direct from Brecht was flammable, and in Weill's musical imagination it ignited instantly. But this internal combustion was not on its own sufficient to make an opera. The work progresses because of the motor functions of its dramatic and moral content. How much of that came from Brecht and how much from Weill cannot be exactly determined. But there is no reason to suppose that Weill was exaggerating when he told Hertzka that apart from purely musical questions his main concern during the first three months of his work with Brecht was "to make the dramatic action (*Handlung*) as consistent, direct, and easily understandable as possible."³ He succeeded only as far as the final scenario is concerned. The basic idea—the "City of Nets"—is strong, and the main line of development is worthy of it. Few opera librettos read better in synopsis form. But the execution of the libretto itself is often haphazard. While Weill deserves a share of the credit for the libretto's merits, he alone must be held ultimately responsible for its defects. He was under no obligation to accept the libretto as it stood, and there was ample time for him to have demanded or made many more revisions than he did.

Yet some measure of failure was inevitable. Brecht was not interested in conventional linear development and, in fact, had never mastered it. In that sense, the theory and practice of the Epic Theatre made a virtue of necessity. In 1936 he told Mordecai Gorelik that an Epic play must avoid being "well made" and that it must be "discursive, not incisive, in form—so much that the sequence of scenes could be rearranged without affecting the devel-

A NOTE ON THIS ESSAY

No words can convey more persuasively or eloquently the extent of the loss that the death of David Drew means to Weill studies than his own. This previously unpublished essay comprises but a small section of a 165-page typescript chapter about *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, originally intended to be part of one of the "works" volumes in Drew's mammoth "Kurt Weill: A Life and Works," the length of which he once estimated at 950,000 words. Extensive annotations in his precise but sometimes almost indecipherable hand evince several layers of revision. Dated at its head, "1965/70. Minor subsequent revisions. Reread 20 Nov. 1994," the draft documents its author's attempt in the mid-1990s to salvage, in the wake of the impact of *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (1987), some of the "works" chapters as stand-alone critical volumes entitled "Kurt Weill at Work." Drew had submitted this one, "1927-1933," to the University of California Press for outside review. Though the two readers' reports recommended acceptance for publication, both noted lacunae and the need for substantial revision and reorganization, thereby inadvertently encouraging Drew not to proceed along those lines but rather ultimately to abandon the endeavor yet again. Copying me on his response of 12 June 1995 to the press's music editor (he had also sent me a copy of the submitted typescript), Drew answered one of the readers with characteristic, yet no less dismissive, diplomacy:

Helpful as your reader's report has surely been to the California Press, its time has yet to come as far as I'm concerned. That time will be when I've finished the specific tasks I've set myself. Until then, a report recommending quite other tasks would only be a

distraction. It will therefore be filed under "Weill: future projects." ... In no sense am I trying to produce a "new" book – only a new edition of an old book which happens not to have been published. Even were the same fate to be in store for this version, I would finish it, and could only finish it, according to the original premises. However well-meaning, calls for this or that kind of restructuring will only be recorded, so to speak, on the long-term cassette of my answer-machine. Incidentally, the last time a manuscript of mine prompted a request for something more "tightly organized," the result was a manuscript of nearly twice the length which I happily placed elsewhere. Rest assured, there will be no such rewriting of this volume or of its successors!

Indeed, in 1998 the project came down from the shelf yet again, this time in anticipation of the worldwide celebration of Weill's centenary. Now reconceived non-chronologically, the new series was to begin with "Weill at 25," continue with three volumes of "Kurt Weill and the Cities of the Plain," and culminate in "Weill at 50." My last late-night conversation with David in June focused on the necessity/feasibility of their completion.

We are deeply grateful to Judith Drew for her kind permission to publish this pearl, demonstrating how essential a task remains for his literal and intellectual heirs to ensure that David's profound knowledge and insights are not buried with him. To that end, I have pledged both personal and institutional assistance in making sure that his literary work about Weill is preserved and made available, as appropriate, for future generations of performers, listeners, and scholars.

— Kim H. Kowalko

opment of the action." The important thing, he continued, "was not the straining towards a climax but the cumulative effect of the scenes."⁴

The form of the *Mahagonny* libretto is in some respects far removed from Brecht's ideas about Epic Theatre and particularly from those he mentioned to Gorelik. The climaxes towards which it "strains" are conventionally placed according to the linear conventions of three-act structures. But this dramatic form—which successfully incorporates choric commentaries and the almost self-contained Epic form of the first three "tableaux" in Act II—is interrupted by the elements imported from the *Songspiel*. These are arbitrary in the literal sense that they represent the local victories of Brecht's will in its conscious or unconscious struggle against the composer's. They were part of the price Weill had to pay for Brecht's collaboration and specifically for his acquiescence in a basic plot-structure that "involves the spectator."

The second act, being more Epic than Dramatic in conception, was crucial for Brecht (as he implies in his notes). Had he been writing a play rather than a libretto, the sequence of the first three tableaux could indeed have been "rearranged without affecting the development of the action." But once Weill had composed the sequence, its form was unalterable. Music, by its very nature, "strains towards a climax." It begins to do so from the moment one note succeeds another. The larger and more continuous its formal spans, the more imperious become its formal demands.

The libretto owes its existence to a confidence trick that Weill played on his librettist with only partial success. Brecht had a lifelong respect for intelligent professionals, particularly in disciplines other than his own, and Weill was the first notable musician he had encountered. It is easy to imagine his growing enthusiasm as he listened—for he was a good listener, and Weill, after years in the Busoni circle, may in this instance have been a persuasive talker—

to enthusiastic prophecies of what might be achieved in the musical theatre were the leading poet-dramatist of his generation to devote his talents to the task Weill had begun with "the great gentleman" Kaiser (who was scarcely a poet) and with Goll (who was scarcely a dramatist). Weill was quite clever enough to impress Brecht with unfamiliar ideas (some of which were Busoni's) and cunning enough to flatter him into accepting them, at least for a while. Only thus could such a scenario have been agreed upon; and only thus could the text of Act I have taken the form it did. It was wholly to Weill's advantage that Brecht began at a disadvantage. But as the novelty and the fascination began to wear off, Brecht must have become increasingly aware that he was working for Weill rather than Weill for him. His growing disillusionment is reflected in the very structure. While the first act is faithful to the principles of Dramatic Theatre and the second is a workable compromise between Dramatic and Epic forms, the third is a mere improvisation that lacks any controlling impulse.

In human terms, a collaboration that had begun with Weill asserting his rightful authority broke down because Brecht finally withdrew the steering-aids his partner needed. His withdrawal expressed itself in another form after the completion of the libretto early in 1928. During the two years that elapsed before the Leipzig premiere, Brecht showed little concern for the results of his labors. It was Weill who submitted to Universal Edition the final typescript libretto, which is corrected in his hand and appears to have been typed by him. It was Weill who handled the correspondence and negotiations. It was Weill who wrote the three introductory articles published before the premiere. Decisively, it was Weill who collaborated with Neher on the booklet of stage directions, briefed the Leipzig director, and supervised the rehearsals. No doubt Brecht was glad to be relieved of the chores and content to leave them in Weill's more experienced hands. But that alone would not explain

why so possessive and exigent an artist should virtually have renounced responsibility for the production of a work that was partly his. If Brecht was inwardly preparing to dissociate himself from the work altogether, his experiences at Leipzig put an end to any such ideas.

In few respects can they have been welcome experiences. The atmosphere of an old provincial opera house, the semi-dictatorial powers granted to the *Generalmusikdirektor*, the primitive histrionics, the sheer weight of the operatic machinery—all this was alien to one who had been brought up in the modern *Kammerspiele* world. The revelation of the work he had helped create can hardly have reconciled him to such conditions. Any impressions he might have formed as Weill played and sang the score to him would have been almost as misleading as his memories—probably somewhat faded after three years—of the Baden-Baden *Songspiel* performances. Misleading, but also much more congenial than what he heard in Leipzig.

The combined effect of an operatic cast in full voice and of an orchestra very much larger than the bands he remembered from the *Songspiel*, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and *Happy End* must have distressed him as much as the discovery that an extra dimension had been added to the music by the very nature of its scoring.

Brecht emerged from the premiere with little to be thankful for. True, the libretto had, after all, attracted more attention than the music; but that was customary, and in any case, the music alone had earned the work what little respect was accorded it. Even the scandal was of questionable value from the Marxist standpoint that Brecht had made his own in the two years since the completion of the libretto. While the merely outraged reactions of the “bourgeois” press and public were wholly to his present advantage, some of the more serious objections raised by the “liberal” critics were embarrassing, and all the Marxist ones gravely so.

To answer those who had accused him of frivolity and incompetence by disowning the work—as he had done with *Happy End* in anticipation of similar charges—would not have been inconsistent with his attitude toward the opera during the two years preceding the Leipzig premiere. But to answer them by providing a fashionably radical explanation for the libretto’s undeniable follies and to formulate that explanation in such a way as to make Weill appear the merest accessory to some purely experimental (and in no way artistic) purpose of his own—that was an altogether irresistible alternative. The result was the famous “Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” which Brecht wrote with his friend Peter Suhrkamp and first published in August 1930, shortly before the important Frankfurt production of the work.⁵

Brecht ended the first section of his “Notes about the Opera” with the remark that “even if one wanted to start a discussion of opera—and of its function!—one would have to write an actual opera.” Such, the reader is then led to believe, was the origin of *Mahagonny*. Being an opera and therefore having to be sold for “evening entertainment,” the work is outwardly “as culinary as ever” and “just as culinary as an opera ought to be.” Yet it contains certain elements which put the spectator in a “moralizing frame of mind.” It thus opens up a discussion of the whole culinary principle, and attacks the society that needs such operas:

It still perches splendidly on the old bough, but at least it has started (out of absentmindedness or bad conscience) to saw it through. That’s what the innovations have achieved with their singing. Real innovations attack the roots.

Apart from a brief postscript (“For Innovations—Against Renovations!”) in which Brecht explains that *Mahagonny* was written two years before and that his subsequent works were more didactic and less culinary, the notes end with that unintentionally revealing image of the saw. A memory of his “absent-minded” agreement with Weill is contributing to his present bad conscience and adding zest to his work, as he now, and only now, begins to saw through the bough on which Weill had once made him sit and on which, as he well knew, Weill was still happily standing.

In the course of these lengthy notes, Weill’s name is mentioned only once, and then in passing. The snub was a purely incidental though doubtless gratifying consequence of Brecht’s main strategy. Brecht could not overtly refer to the views Weill had already published about opera in general and *Mahagonny* in particular without exposing everything his pretense of objectivity was designed to conceal. In order to regain “control” of the alienated product, he was compelled to attribute to its production certain attitudes and intentions that were exclusively his own. These Brecht could only invent, since the attitudes and intentions already defined by Weill were ones which he—however absent-mindedly—had once shared. Weill had made out that *Mahagonny* was a constructively innovative opera, indeed, a work of art, and a serious one. And so—even at the cost of denying himself credit for his own valuable contributions—Brecht depicted a *Mahagonny* that was unserious, inartistic, and deliberately destructive. Thereby he also accommodated past criticisms of the libretto and discouraged the kind of future investigations that might reveal his picture as the calculated falsification it was. In his notes he repeatedly insists that *Mahagonny* is “entertainment,” that it is just a “bit of fun” (with provocative implications). “Why is *Mahagonny* an opera?” he asks:

Because its basic attitude is that of an opera, namely culinary . . . (However) a certain irrationality, unreality and lack of seriousness was introduced at the right moment in order to strike with a double meaning.

A footnote to the latter sentence proves to be a diversionary irrelevance; the continuation of the main text sheds no light on the kind of double-meaning Brecht had in mind; and the question of how the “right” moment is determined in so chancy a context is shamelessly begged:

The irrationality which thus makes its appearance is only suitable for the occasion of which it appears. Such an attitude is purely hedonistic (*schlechtweg genießerisch*).

Criticism of the “genießerisch” attitudes of opera composers and audiences in previous eras had been one of the features of an important article Weill had published in 1929; following his teacher Busoni, he had expressly identified his own operatic output with the intellectual and moral reaction against such attitudes.

Had Brecht been rash enough to enter into a public controversy with his composer, he would have lost everything he hoped to gain with his “Notes.” Ironically enough, the “free discussion” of content and function which Brecht claimed was “completely excluded in the old operas” is excluded no less completely by his own notes, and for a reason similar to the one he gives. To gratify himself and reassure his doubting audience, to cast a spell and promote illusions—that is the very essence of his pseudo-didactic enterprise. His notes are as cooked-up, as culinary, as could be. They are designed to inhibit free discussion because such a discussion could

easily lead to the discovery that their *real* content is wounded pride and their real function is to discredit if not demolish Weill's work.

It may seem strange that an act of sabotage unparalleled in the history of operatic collaboration went undetected at the time. But Brecht's success was the result of superb planning based on two probabilities; first, that the credence given to an author's pronouncements will increase in proportion to the apparent modesty of his claims (e.g., "just a bit of fun"); secondly, that his readers, finding no sign of discord, would assume that he was speaking on Weill's behalf and would therefore not trouble to check on what Weill had previously written (even if they knew where to look for it). It was a shrewd gamble, and for many years it paid off. Since his death Brecht's Notes have been quoted or alluded to in innumerable books, articles, and program notes. For at least twenty-five years it was almost universally assumed that Weill was either at one with them, or that his own views were unworthy of mention.

Notes

[1.] Reprinted in Kurt Weill, *Briefwechsel mit der Universal Edition*, ed. N. Grosch (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2002), 98.

2. "Aktuelles Theater" (*Melos* 8, no. 12 [August 1929], 524–27; reprinted in Kurt Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. D. Drew [Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1975], 45–49), and "Anmerkungen zu meiner Oper *Mahagonny*" (*Die Musik* 12, no. 6 [March 1930], 440–41; reprinted in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, 56–57). This claim is borne out by the authors' publishing contract with Universal Edition, according to which Brecht received two-thirds and Weill one-third of authors' royalties from libretto sales. No share was allotted either to Elisabeth Hauptmann or to Caspar Neher, who in Brecht's *Versuche* edition are listed together with Weill as "Mitarbeiter" for the libretto.

[3.] Weill, letter to Hertzka, 27 December 1927 (see note 1).

[4.] As recalled by Gorelik in his article "Brecht: 'I Am the Einstein of the New Stage Form . . .'" *Theatre Arts* 41, no. 3 (March 1957), 86.

[5.] Originally published as "Zur Soziologie der Oper—Anmerkungen zu *Mahagonny*," *Musik und Gesellschaft* 1, no. 4 (August 1930), 105–12.