

Two Weill Scores

KURT WEILL Concerto for violin and wind orchestra.
Universal, 33s
—Down in the Valley. Chappell, vocal score 17s 6d

Weill's Concerto is a brave and sometimes moving piece, which deserves to be better known. It was written in the summer of 1924 immediately after Weill's return from his first visit to Italy. In form and content it seems to reflect something of that experience. It was first performed in Paris in 1925 by Marcel Darrieux, and then taken up by Flesch's pupil Stefan Frenkel, who played it frequently in Central Europe and Russia. There were a few additional performances by Kulenkampf and others; but Frenkel virtually monopolized the work until 1930. From then until 1955 it was seldom if ever heard. The present publication was doubtless prompted by its successful revival in Central Europe, America, and Israel; also, perhaps, by Robert Gerle's recent Westminster recording with Scherchen.

The score is of large 'pocket' size ($6\frac{1}{2}'' \times 9\frac{1}{2}''$), but seems to be intended as a conductor's score as well as for study. It should fulfil both purposes satisfactorily, though the binding could with advantage have been stronger. Otherwise the chief defect is the lack of editorial notes. Presumably the text was prepared from Weill's autograph, which is in Vienna. Clear and careful though his script is, it is hard to believe that there were no questionable readings. In any case there should have been a warning about the important xylophone part. Should one expect this to sound an octave above the written pitch? If that was Weill's intention (as seems likely), there is a problem at fig.4 in the second movement, where the notes $c\sharp^4$ and d^4 are called for: a semitone and a tone above the instrument's top note. No doubt for this reason, the entire xylophone part is usually played at written pitch: a practice that creates new, though different problems.

A violin-and-piano arrangement of the Concerto, made by Weill himself, was published in 1925, and for over 40 years has remained the only printed text. It gives a very false impression. Weill composed without recourse to the piano, and his orchestral textures, which are among the Concerto's most striking features, defy adequate transcription. Considering that the character of his orchestration is unique in modern German music, it is strange that until now the only work available in study score has been the op 8 string quartet—certainly the weakest of his German pieces. The Concerto is much stronger, but still outclassed by most of the other concert works—notably the two symphonies. In some respects it is less assured than even the first symphony, which was written four years earlier. At that time Weill was still using the late-Romantic idiom in which he had first found himself as a composer. His teacher Busoni tried to lead him away from it, and the conflict is particularly apparent in the works of 1923-4. The Concerto was an attempt to come to terms with the 'free' style of the post-war years. Impressive though it is in many ways, it is not wholly successful.

The work is in three movements, of which the middle one is again subdivided into three (*Notturmo*, *Cadenza*, and *Serenata*). The idea of a central triptych, and something of its ghostly atmosphere, was probably suggested by Mahler's 7th Symphony.

However, the musical substance throughout owes less to Mahler than that of any of Weill's other concert pieces, not to speak of his theatre ones. There are hints of Berg in the first movement, of Stravinsky and Hindemith in the second. On the other hand, there is little trace of neo-classicism; and despite the orchestral forces (10 wind instruments, percussion, and double-basses), no concession to the then fashionable 'Sachlichkeit'.

Placed beside the handful of works today regarded as typical of Weill—all but one dating from the years 1928-30—the Concerto may appear somewhat freakish. Its closest relatives have still to be rediscovered. Admittedly, a listener familiar with one or two of the celebrated works might recognize certain attitudes or gestures: compare for instance the protesting triplet figures at fig.7 in the finale with the music at fig.166 in the first act of *Mahagonny*; or again, the orchestra's weird comment two bars before fig.35 in the same movement with the *Happy End* chorus 'Geht hinein in die Schlacht'. But the formal processes and the harmonic idiom are so different that such resemblances cannot tell us much beyond the fact that the concerto, traditionally, has dramatic connotations, with the soloist as the embattled protagonist. The drama seems to be about the threat of annihilation latent in the first movement's development and manifest at its climax. The second movement is transitional, the third a release into southern dance rhythm. The whole conception, unlike the idiom, is still late-romantic. That, and a slight unconscious debt to Jewish modes of feeling and expression—note the modal configurations in the latter part of the *Notturmo*—distinguish it from the world of Hindemith's op 36 chamber concertos, the first of which (for piano) is almost exactly contemporary.

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Tonally the work proceeds from an extreme freedom to comparative stability and finally to an F major cadence that resolves earlier ambiguities. The quasi-atonal writing is more assured than the quasi-tonal. Indeed, the weakest feature of the work is the harmonic structure of the finale. Certain ideas, such as the $F\sharp/B\flat$ minor oppositions in the early stages, seem schematic. The 'transfigured night' episode that precedes the final *moto perpetuo*, though beautiful in itself, is clumsily introduced, and so fails to match the visionary effect of its predecessor in the first movement.

These and other shortcomings are outweighed by the merits. Like all of Weill's early works with the exception of the op 8 quartet—and even that is not without inspiration—the Concerto is intensely alive. Although less well composed than Hindemith's op 36 concertos it deserves a place beside them, and may indeed have a greater claim on our affection.

The score of *Down in the Valley* is a new issue, under the Chappell imprint, of the original 1948 publication by G. Schirmer (New York). *Down in the Valley* was composed in 1945 as a pilot venture in a scheme originated by Olin Downes for a series of commercially sponsored radio operas based on folk material. The scheme did not materialize. Three years later Weill and his librettist Arnold Sundgaard arranged and expanded the work for opera societies, college groups, and the like. In that form it was an

immediate success. By 1957 it had had more than 1,600 productions in America, and at least 6,000 performances. In the face of such success—which has proved enduring—criticism might seem superfluous. The work apparently fulfilled and still fulfils a need. It inspired numerous other composers to write similar ballad operas, and its influence may even be felt in a work like Copland's *The Tender Land*.

The fact remains that *Down in the Valley* is not the kind of work likely to find favour in the higher reaches of the musical world. It is too obviously subservient to the commercial circumstances of its composition. At best it has a certain folksy charm—though Annie, or rather, Jennie, doesn't get her gun. At worst it is the merest tear-jerker. If one can stomach the sentimentality of the libretto, it is possible to find something to admire in the musico-dramatic form. The basic idea of a set of dramatized variations on the title song is effective, and some of the episodes are well done: for instance, the pseudo-folksong 'Brack Weaver, my true love', and the barn dance with its lyrical interlude and naively brutal climax. But as a whole, the music, apart from the still masterly instrumentation, lacks conviction and coherence. Gobbets of undigested Wagner or Puccini are lumped together with stock Tin Pan Alley formulae. Even the technique is deficient. Shoddy modulations (see p.43) abound; simple tunes ('The Lonesome Dove') are decked out with meaningless counterpoints; empty ostinati do service for real invention.

For those who admire Weill's European works on musical grounds, a piece like *Down in the Valley*—or its successors, *Street Scene* and *Lost in the Stars*—

must come as a grave shock. I know of no composer, indeed no creative artist of any kind, in whose work there is so great a gulf between the best and the worst. What is the explanation? The favourite answer, particularly in literary circles, is that Weill was really the creature of Brecht: clever enough to be guided and inspired by him, but not strong enough to stand up on his own. This does not bear musical examination. At least 15 important works written independently give the lie to it, and in some of them Weill surpasses anything he did in collaboration with Brecht. The 'Brecht-Weill' legend will survive only so long as these works are denied their proper place on the musical scene.

The second answer, a kinder variation of the first, is that Weill derived more strength from the social and artistic context of his early years than from his natural resources. This is a little nearer the mark, but it leaves too much out of account, and consequently the emphasis is wrong. One cannot, for instance, afford to ignore the fact that uprooted and isolated though Weill was in the mid-1930s, he continued to develop and renew himself as an artist. The real crisis came in the winter of 1939-40. But even then he was not finally defeated—not perhaps until 1945 and the crushing reception of *The Firebrand of Florence*, his last work in any kind of European tradition. His reaction was *Down in the Valley*. Behind the pretty picture of Grandma Moses which he chose for the cover of the Schirmer-Chappell score, there is an abyss. Whatever it held for him, he concealed it from his friends and not least from himself. But that is a matter for biographers. The music tells its own story.

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