

Kurt Weill and his critics

By David Drew



A scene from the 1963 production of *Mahagonny* at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London.

have been the first to reject them. Consequently the claims made for his music in Germany during the immediate post-war years tended to be muted in tone. The students at the early Darmstadt Ferienkurse were therefore unlikely to have heard of them; nor did they have any reason to know that among the teachers and lecturers at that remarkable institution were several of Weill's old colleagues and admirers.

Of them, perhaps the most challenging was Theodor W. Adorno. His famous *Philosophie der neuen Musik*³ appeared in 1949, and at Darmstadt was devoured as avidly as the piano étude, "Mode de Valeurs et d'Intensités" which Olivier Messiaen had composed there (in a very different spirit!) that same year. Like Messiaen's étude, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* seemed to have appeared at the very moment appointed by history; and its influence was immediate, not least among those who rejected certain of Adorno's conclusions about Stravinsky and neoclassicism. At that stage the book's organic relationship to Adorno's musical writings in the Weimar years can only have been appreciated by his old associates. Consequently they alone were in a position to notice that Adorno now disregarded the special role he had found for Weill some twenty years before, and excluded him from his choice of representative figures. It was not that his criteria had changed, or that his present argument would in any way have been weakened by a reference to Weill. It was simply that he had long since parted company from the music, not to speak of its composer.

Within a year of the publication of *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, Weill was dead. Predictably, many of the European obituaries—and especially the one by Adorno—read as if the writers were reluctant to start shovelling amid the abandoned ruins of his European

Almost exactly twenty-five years ago the French composer Jean Wiener opened an obituary tribute with the words "Kurt Weill est mort".* Today those words may remind us of another article by a very different kind of French composer, Pierre Boulez. Written just one year later, and published under the deliberately provocative title "Schoenberg est mort",¹ it is one of the key documents in post-war music, and was again recognized as such when it was republished in the course of the Schoenberg centenary year. Boulez argued that Schoenberg, like Nietzsche's God, had had his day; that he had failed to grasp the morphological implications of his own discoveries; and that the truth which had eluded him was to be found in the work of his pupil Webern. Such views were readily endorsed by most of the composers who gathered round Boulez, Stockhausen and Nono in the early years of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik.

During the war years in Vienna, Weill's name had once been mentioned in the presence of Webern, who had promptly exploded.² During the early post-war years in Darmstadt, it was not a name anybody was likely to mention, or to bother about. If Schoenberg had "died" for Boulez and like-minded contemporaries, Weill had never lived—for none of his musical territory was visible from the rooftops of the Schloss Kranichstein, while its social hinterland seemed utterly remote from Marshall Plan Europe. Even the few older composers who had bravely tried to sustain an "underground"

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Weill tradition during the Third Reich had already turned in other directions. If Boris Blacher's *Romeo und Julia* of 1943 is the last work in that "underground" tradition—and surely the most original and moving of all direct successors to Weill's *Jaeger* and *Die Bürgschaft*—his *Preussisches Märgen* of 1949 closes an entire phase of development which Weill had begun nearly a quarter of a century earlier with his *Kaiser* and *Goll* operas.

It was an unfortunate coinci-

dence that Weill's life ended just as the "new music" of Europe finally lost contact with his European achievements. Without at least some stimulus from the creative side, there was now even less chance of a new school of Weill criticism evolving in place of the one that was dispersed in 1933. At a time when the great pioneers of modern music had still to be rescued from the rubble left by twelve years of *Kulturreaktion*, the reassessment of Weill cannot have seemed an urgent priority. Admit-

tedly, the unique position he had won for himself in the musical theatre of Weimar Germany had brought him special penalties before and after the Nazi seizure of power; and because his career had been closely bound up with a theatre system that existed nowhere else, the costs of emigration were in some respects much higher for him than for any other refugee composers of the time. But compassionate grounds are a poor basis for claims on behalf of a creative artist, and Weill would

career. Weill had died an unrepentant Broadway composer, and as such was honoured and mourned in the American press. Those of his old admirers in America and Europe who regarded his apparently wholehearted commitment to Broadway as a form of self-betrayal, if not of cultural or ideological treason, had some excuse if they misjudged him. On the one hand, the nature and background of his Broadway commitment was much more complex than one could guess without access to the relevant documents and manuscripts. On the other, his own attempts at explanation had been uncharacteristically confused—so much so that he seemed simultaneously to have lost sight of his European career, and not to have grasped the full implications of his Broadway one. And yet it is doubtful whether he could have defended himself more effectively against the criticisms of old supporters without compromising himself in other ways, and at the same time undermining his new position.

However, Adorno's disengagement from Weill's music had occurred very much earlier than all this, while he and Weill were still in Germany. Although Adorno never formulated his reasons for withdrawing critical support from a composer whom he certainly continued to care about, they can be inferred from his writings on *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* and from the fact that he published nothing about any later work of Weill's. It is highly significant that promised articles on *Der Jasager* (1930) and *Die Bürgschaft* (1932) never materialized, for it was in these works that Weill consolidated the tendency of *Der Lindberghflug* (1929) and dispensed with most of the lurid colours and demotic usages characteristic of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Happy End*, and *Mahagonny*—Adorno's beloved trilogy. Although the more "classical" manner of *Der Jasager* and *Die Bürgschaft* in no way neutralized the disruptive and explosive elements admired by Adorno, it did represent a relative stabilization of the surfaces of the "Weill-style", and as such it conflicted with the case Adorno had so ingeniously made for Weill.

That it was also a case in his own defence is evident from the opening gambit in his very first article on *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where he confesses "how remote from me at first is a music which does not draw the musical consequences from the present situation, but attempts to operate through the transformation of the old worn-out material". Here speaks a critic (and, let us not forget, a composer) who was committed to the Schoenbergian revolution and its historic role. What followed in this and subsequent articles on Weill was a brilliant yet extremely risky rationalization of his liking and admiration for music which Schoenberg had anathematized. It was brilliant in its discovery of some of Weill's fundamental sources of imaginative power; yet it was risky in that it entailed the transvaluation of an entirely negative view of the music. It was a view from the Schoenbergian standpoint, but reproduced in reverse image and on a new axis so that the "bad" features denounced by Schoenberg could appear to be "good" in relation to extra-musical and anti-aesthetic functions which Schoenberg had never dreamed of.

The cost of this tour de force is high. Once it is accepted that Weill has made a virtue of shoddy composition and ill-assorted anachronisms by associating them with the pathology of late-capitalist society, the critic is unable to ascribe to the music any kind of compositional potency or specificity, and hence to distinguish it from—say—the products of the

French "wrong-note" school of the 1920s. Thus Adorno found himself in the awkward position of not being free to argue in purely musical terms the crucial point in his case for Weill, namely that the music is critical of what it portrays. Moreover—and this surely proved to be the decisive difficulty—if it is true that in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, etc. Weill's musical ideas have no form-giving potentiality, and that the music itself acquires its strength and coherence only through the calculated exploitation of weakness and the ingenious montage of inconsistencies, then the style was, by definition, incapable of fruitful development. In other words, if Adorno's thesis was correct, the composer of *Die Dreigroschenoper* could not then have written such a work as *Der Jasager*, nor could the composer of the *Mahagonny* opera then have written *Die Bürgschaft*.

One sees why Adorno fell silent, while his friend Ernst Bloch was free to address himself to the subject of *Die Bürgschaft*, the weightiest and, to some minds, the finest of Weill's stage works. Nevertheless, it would be folly to conclude that Adorno's contributions to the pre-war Weill literature are of anything less than commanding importance. Just as he could convey more about music in a mere parenthesis than many writers on music contrive to say in a lifetime, so do his occasional critical errors prove more illuminating than much that is incontrovertible in the work of lesser men. Precisely because his errors generally occur within reach of a central truth which no one else might otherwise have discerned, his silence about Weill's post-*Mahagonny* developments could not have lasted for long, and might even have been broken as



Kurt Weill in 1926; drawing by Max Dungert.

early as *Der Silbersee* (1933), for in that work the new "classical" style is reintegrated with extensions of the Song-style. But circumstances did not allow. The events of 1933 brutally severed the old connexions, and in the seventeen years that followed, nothing was repaired. Behind the heartfelt regrets of a few of Weill's European obituarists, and dominating the cold and sometimes crushing formalities of the remainder, can be discerned a feeling that it was now proper to speak in the past tense not only of the man but also of his works.

And yet within five years there was much talk, and some evidence, of a "Weill renaissance". Certainly a few of the works were being played and recorded and discussed; and one of them, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, had established itself without difficulty as a classic. Observers therefore had grounds for supposing that the process of rediscovery and reassessment which so often begins some years after the death or dethroning of a creative artist was now firmly established, and that it would continue almost of its own accord. But appearances were deceptive. In the first place, the revival was not entirely spontaneous, for it owed much to its one star performer, Lotte Lenya, whose magnificent efforts had helped initiate it. Secondly, it had no sooner attracted international attention than it became involved in, and was swiftly subordinated to, the phenomenal growth in the reputation of Bertolt Brecht. During the years 1956-60 discussion of Weill was almost exclusively related to the reappraisal of his great contem-

porary who, until so recently, had been given little credit in the West for anything apart from the commercial success of his adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera*—and even that had been partly attributed to Weill.

The reappraisal of Brecht was none the less welcome for being so long overdue. But the side effects for his first musical collaborator were unfortunate. Naturally enough, few of Brecht's early advocates were familiar with musicological disciplines, and those who were at all interested in music had no brief to defend Weill—if indeed they thought him worth defending in the face of such manifest scepticism from the musical world. The problem was self-generating—for the more Weill was shown in the light of Brecht, the greater that scepticism became. In the absence of any body of informed criticism from the musical side—as distinct from the scattered work of a few individuals—the usage "Brecht-Weill", which had begun as a necessary form of journalistic shorthand, came to denote a pseudo-entity in which nothing specifically Weillian was identifiable. It was as if some form of osmotic pressure had allowed popular conceptions of "Brecht" to absorb and completely diffuse those of "Weill".

Some such pressure was perhaps inevitable during the late 1950s, when many commentators in the West were still maintaining that the "anarchic" Brecht of the 1920s was preferable on artistic grounds to the "doctrinaire" Marxist of 1930 onwards. Conviction, and the expediences of the Cold War, combined to lend a special prominence to the works on which Weill and Brecht collaborated, since with one exception they dated from the years 1927-30, and that exception, *Die sieben Todsünden* (1933), was from Brecht's point of view a mere bagatelle. As soon as the general public in the West had identified the Brecht-Weill label with a commercially successful product, the label became an indispensable part of a marketing enterprise which happened to serve the interests of those who recognized that if Brecht could be said to have absorbed Weill, then he could also be said to have been diluted by him. Near Brecht, it was felt, was not for the palate of Everyman.

Whatever the advantages of attempting to promote Brecht in terms of his collaboration with Weill, they were bound to be short-lived: the works themselves were too few and too vulnerable to criticism on extra-musical grounds, let alone musical ones. Meanwhile the Western world slowly and hesitantly came to accept that the mature Brecht begins exactly where the collaboration with Weill stopped short—that is, at *Die Massnahme* (1930). Once that was generally acknowledged, it was only a matter of time before Brecht's collaboration with Hanns Eisler was found to be not only much more extensive than his collaboration with Weill, but also very much closer to his own way of thinking.

Comparison between the rapid growth of Eisler's reputation in Western Europe and the United States since the late 1960s and the so-called Weill renaissance of the previous decade will reveal that they are essentially different phenomena. Already in the late 1920s Eisler had openly rejected the "bourgeois" world, which had responded by continuing to ignore his existence, until as late as September 1947, when he was summoned from the obscurity of his recent career as a Hollywood film-composer and interrogated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in Washington. The blanket of silence that was then thrown over his music in every Western country except Great Britain—which, as usual, misunderstood the bulletins and carried on as if nothing had happened—was so heavy that its sudden removal in the late 1960s (after some vigorous pulls from the student movement) produced the effect of a double revelation: on the one hand, Eisler as folk-hero, prophet and sage for a new generation in the West, on the other, Eisler as modern classic acclaimed by pundits who had been forgetting to inquire about him for twenty years. The impossible had come to pass, and the pity was that Eisler himself had not lived to witness it and grin.

Whereas the popularity of Weill's music a decade earlier had no background more substantial than the public's vaguely anti-authoritarian mood and its regressive fantasies about pre-Hitler Berlin, the

† Two of Schoenberg's pupils—Walter Goehr and Marc Blitzstein—have testified to Schoenberg's furious dismissal of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Maintaining that the music constituted a betrayal of the cause of modern music which the once-gifted Weill had fought for, Schoenberg dissected one or two of the songs for the benefit of his Berlin master-class, and maintained that they were technically far inferior to Lehar. Those who were close to Schoenberg knew better than to contradict him. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how many of his circle were secret admirers of Weill; even Alban Berg crept into a rehearsal of *Mahagonny* in Vienna in 1932.

discovery of Eisler was from the start inseparable from the discovery of how his politico-ideological aims determined every aspect of the musical character. Having defined his views in essays and lectures¹ which exhibit such dialectical mastery and linguistic skill, such breadth of reference, and sharpness of wit, that one almost needs to remind oneself that he was primarily a composer, he was never in any danger of being regarded as a mere appendage of Brecht.

If the individuality of Eisler's music may sometimes have been questioned, it was only because of the easily discernible influences, first from Schoenberg and then from Weill. But the Eislerization of Schoenbergian models in such works as the *Divertimento* opus 4 and the *Palmström Songs* opus 5 was consummate; and a comparable feat with regard to Weill proved so convincing that the influence quietly flowed back to its source and became detectable in some of Weill's songs of 1934-38². That circuit was reproduced on the personal level: Eisler had enthusiastically congratulated Weill on the *Mahagonny-Songspiel* after its first performance in 1927, and had declared it to be a work of genius; Weill for his part had spoken warmly of Eisler's score for *Die Mutter* in an American press interview given after the 1935 performances in New York³.

Yet the differences between the two composers were much greater than any resemblances. Eisler's is a wholly unequivocal and self-denying art dedicated to the systematic definition and clarification of objective realities. In excluding, with characteristic single-mindedness, every trace of psychological or autobiographical *espressivo*—as the much more traditional art of Shostakovich has so fruitfully failed to do—this important plain-song of the Dialectic acquires a uniformity, and an air of philosophical certainty which music has not known for centuries (except perhaps in such isolated areas as the motets of Bruckner and the organ music of Messiaen).

Weill's art, on the other hand, is consistently and tellingly equivocal. Dualistic from the start—that is, from its first and explicitly religious phase—it proceeds via the discovery of the schizoid aspects in Busoni's classicism and Kaiser's Expressionism to the more important discovery (in *Royal Palace*) of their relevance to the schisms within society and indeed within ourselves. Ambiguities of structure and expression, together with apparent anomalies of tone and idiom, are now exploited with such merciless accuracy that no formal or emotional expectations are secure. Methodical in this as in its deliberately outrageous breaches of etiquette, the music declares itself to be the enemy of most orthodoxies and all systems. Hence it prefers to leave unanswered the social and moral questions which it has raised unless the answers happen to suggest themselves in terms of the simplest and least partial appeals to humanity and justice. In short, it is the expression of an essentially romantic sensibility, awakened by new perceptions and reacting to changed circumstances; but in no sense the expression of a legislator or ideologue.

It is in the nature of our age that the systematic tends to be rated higher than the intuitive. Since Weill was essentially an intuitive artist whose considerable intelligence manifested itself in musical rather than conceptual spheres, Eisler may now seem preferable even in the eyes of those who, on systematic grounds, reject his arguments. Others, however, may find that for them Weill's unanswered

questions strike deeper, and that the enigmas of his art exert a greater fascination than any political or programmatic content. Some such response is clearly envisaged in Paul Bekker's open letter about Weill's *Die Bürgschaft*, and is as characteristic of the intellectual tradition from which Weill was trying to extricate himself as it is alien to its materialist rivals and successors. But, whatever the future verdicts on Weill and Eisler—and at present the balance is certainly tilting in Eisler's favour—the temptation to condemn one composer from the witness-box of the other is unworthy of both, and should be resisted.

Despite the ease with which musical officials in the West can pretend to accept Eisler as a "respectable" (Schoenberg-trained!) figure and then misuse him as a broom to sweep Weill under the carpet, the new appreciation of Eisler's music has certainly served the wider understanding of Weill's. For it has finally put paid to the indiscriminate Brecht-Weill cult, and discredited the collective label that went with it. Once it is recognized that the collaboration of Eisler and Brecht was distinguished by an unprecedented intellectual rapport between writer and musician that embraced every level of the creative relationship and extended as far as the dialectical-materialist method could carry it, then it becomes possible to grasp that the distinguishing features of the earlier collaboration were the exact opposite: the purely instinctive nature of the rapport, and the comprehensiveness of the tension that underlay it.

When Eisler remarked that the "highly gifted" Weill never really grasped what Brecht was aiming for⁴, he should have added that the reverse was equally true. In fact, it was as if two "highly gifted" men from different lands had chanced to meet in the twilight at the point where their paths crossed. Each, as it were, had liked the tone of the other's voice without understanding much of what the other was saying; and since neither was quite sure of finding his way in the gathering darkness, they had agreed to repair to a nearby inn. After a mug or two of ale their language difficulties had seemed to dissolve and their conversation about the deplorable weather conditions in those parts had turned to a discussion of the state of the world. This, they had agreed, was no less deplorable, but certainly more susceptible to human influence once it was seen for what it was. On that assumption they had commenced work on the opera *Mahagonny*.

It was a collaboration that would hardly have survived long enough to produce a single work, let alone six in the space of three years, but for a high degree of self-deception and mutual incomprehension. It remained feasible so long as the characteristic tension was confined to the subconscious creative levels and was no stronger than the natural affinity between two such dissimilar yet strikingly complementary minds. But once the tension had begun to manifest itself in terms of the age-old rivalry between words and music, it gained in strength what it lost in meaning. If Weill suspected that Brecht had forgotten the egalitarian principles with which they had begun, Brecht for his part seems to have inferred from the presentation and staging of *Mahagonny* in March 1930 that Weill was behaving like any successful opera composer who has learnt how to extract librettos from more or less complaisant collaborators.

There is no doubt that Weill had from the start looked upon Brecht as a potential source of librettos; yet it was implicit in his immense admiration for Brecht, and funda-

mental to his creative purpose, that they should be librettos of a new type and very special quality (thereby, incidentally, obviating any further disasters of the sort that had just cost him eighteen months' work and left him with a full-length opera, *Na und*, which nobody wanted because of the shortcomings of the libretto). And yet, tactful as Weill had been in his preliminary remarks about *Mahagonny*,⁵ he had not disguised his opinion that in opera musical considerations must come first; and that opinion had been clearly and repeatedly expressed in his more general articles about opera.⁶ But if Brecht or his friends had any suspicion, however unjust, that Weill was making use of him in the traditional operatic style, it can only have been strengthened, and perhaps even confirmed, by the content of Ernst Latzko's introductory article, "Weill-Brecht's *Mahagonny*". Although Weill might not have been happy about a few of Latzko's observations—for instance, that his music "has no expressive intention" (a would-be Stravinskian notion), or that the trial scene is in sonata-form (a would-be Bergian one)—it is clear that the article as a whole appeared with his approval, and obvious that Brecht was not consulted. Brecht retaliated by preparing his famous "Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*" with the assistance of his friend Peter Suhrkamp, but without Weill and naturally without alluding to the hapless Latzko, whose devotion to the "culinary" art of opera was never in question. The uninformed reader of the "Anmerkungen" would never guess how extensively they conflicted with Weill's views about opera in general and *Mahagonny* in particular. By the time the "Anmerkungen" reached print,¹⁰ the collaboration was over and the two men had gone their separate ways—Brecht with *Die Massnahme*, Weill with *Die Bürgschaft*.

The second and concluding part of "Kurt Weill and his critics" will appear next week.

1. First published in an anonymous English translation in *The Score*, London, 1952.

2. Luigi Dallapiccola, *Appunti, Incontri, Meditazione*, Milan, 1970, page 108ff. See also Dallapiccola, "Meeting with Anton Webern", *Tempo* 99, London, 1972, page 5ff.

3. Tübingen, 1949. Second edition, Frankfurt, 1958.

4. Hanns Eisler, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Leipzig, 1961; *Sinn und Form Sonderheft Hanns Eisler*, Berlin, 1964; Eisler, *Musik und Politik Schriften 1924-1948*, Leipzig, 1973.

5. For instance, *Der Kuhhandel*, "Die Ballade vom Pharaoh"; *Knickerbocker Holiday*, "There's Nowhere To Go But Up!"

6. Ralph Winett, "Composer of the Hour—An Interview with Kurt

Weill", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1936.

7. Hans Bunge, *Fragen Sie mehr über Brecht—Hanns Eisler im Gespräch*, Munich, 1970.

8. "Anmerkungen zu meiner Oper *Mahagonny*", *Die Musik*, XXII: 6, 1938, page 27ff; "Vorwort zum Regiebuch der Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*", *Anbruch*, XII:1, 1930. Both reprinted in Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Frankfurt, 1975.

9. Weill, "Über den gestischen Charakter der Musik", *Die Musik*, XXI, 1929, page 419ff. Also in Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, op. cit.

10. *Musik und Gesellschaft*, I:4, Wolfenbüttel, 1930, page 105ff; *Blätter der Städtische Bühnen*, Frankfurt, 1929/30.