

KURT WEILL

1900-1950

by David Drew

IT IS DOUBTFUL if any important composer has suffered more from political persecution than Kurt Weill. Having established himself, with Hindemith and Krenek, as one of the three most important German composers of his generation, he was driven from his native land by the Nazis, his works were completely banned, and many of his scores and recordings were destroyed. Although he continued composing in exile, he seems to have attempted to find a completely new musical role for himself—as a composer of musical comedy. There is no real continuity between his pre-1933 and his post-1933 careers. In a sense, the Weill who has earned himself a place in the history of serious music was 'killed' by the Nazis.

Weill wrote only two ballets.¹ The first, produced in Berlin in 1922, was a children's pantomime called *Die Zaubernacht*. The score incorporated settings of poems by Kipling and Villon. His second ballet, *Die Sieben Todsünden*, was produced in Paris in 1933 with choreography by Balanchine. Like *Die Zaubernacht*, the work centres around settings of poems—in this case by Bert Brecht. The ballet was presented in London by Balanchine's *Les Ballets 1933*, with Tilly Losch as soloist, and was also given by the Danish Ballet in 1935, with choreography by Harald Lander. Since then the work has not been performed, for reasons connected with copyright, but there is now a prospect of several revivals. Musically, it deserves to stand with Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione*, at the very head of ballets written by modern German composers. But it is possible that the music and the verse already say so much that the choreographer may find himself somewhat

¹ However, two of Weill's one-act operas, *Der Protagonist* and *Royal Palace* attempt extensive and structurally integrated use of ballet. Indeed, *Royal Palace* (a symbolic fantasy incorporating a film interlude in the manner later adopted by Berg for his opera *Lulu*) is as much a ballet as an opera. It is a unique experiment, whose musical beauties warrant the work's revival.

cramped. *The Judgement of Paris*, on the other hand, is not an original ballet score, but is arranged from Weill's brilliant music to Brecht's play 'Die Dreigroschenoper'.

THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS

*Music arranged for two pianos by John Cooke
from 'Die Dreigroschenoper'*

First Produced: London, July 1938

Company: Ballet Club

Book: Antony Tudor

Choreography: Antony Tudor

Scenery and Costumes: Hugh Laing

Later production: Ballet Theatre (déc. Ballard) 1940

The Judgement of Paris is described as a 'Satiric ballet in one act'. It is generally regarded as one of the most successful of Tudor's slighter ballets—it has frequently been performed by the Ballet Rambert Company. But it must be confessed that the musical conception is not as happy as the choice of composer. The music, with its intensely vocal melodic lines and its astonishingly 'integral' instrumentation, could hardly be less suitable for two-piano transcription. Brecht's original play and Antony Tudor's scenario are very different in substance and dramatic shape, and the arranger is only able to use a small proportion of the music. Not only is the order of the pieces, and in consequence the important key-scheme, changed radically, but introductions are detached from the pieces to which they belong, dynamic markings are altered, and occasionally new figurations, that are nothing to do with the original, are added. It is obvious that the arranger has been forced to work from the piano reduction of Weill's score, for the distribution of the instrumental parts in the introduction of the *Kanon-Song* is not satisfactorily expressed in the piano arrangement. (It is worth noting that all copies of Weill's full score were withdrawn in 1933 at the express order of the Nazis.) If the authors of this ballet wished to take their inspiration directly from the *Dreigroschenoper* music, it is a pity that they did not choose the superb instrumental arrangement for chamber ensemble which Weill made, under the title *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*. However Weill was later prevailed upon to arrange the music of *The Judgement of Paris* for full orchestra, and in this form it has been presented by Ballet Theatre.

The scene of *The Judgement of Paris* is a Parisian 'dive'. Three ladies who would doubtless describe themselves as 'entertainers'—though their names are Juno, Venus and Minerva—are sitting at the tables. With them sits the Waiter. The music of the famous *Moritat* aptly comments on the scene of late-night boredom. But as the halting introduction to *Pollys Lied* is heard, a Customer enters. He is rather drunk; but his air of seedy prosperity as he sends the Waiter for a bottle of wine electrifies the girls. Clearly they must contest for his favours.

Juno dances first. Miraculously she has still retained a certain quality of innocence, despite her unequivocal gestures; but the Customer is too drunk to notice her charm. The more obvious attractions of the plump, red-headed Venus—who dances with two pink hoops—penetrate the Customer's alcoholic haze, and he sends a drink to her table. A somewhat desperate and battle-scarred Minerva—the triumphs of her youth long past—now comes forward and attempts to show, like Don Marquis's world-weary cat Mehitabel, that 'there's life in the old girl yet'. The display, which culminates in an inelegant and inefficient 'splits', would be comic if it were not (in the hands of a sensitive dancer) so intensely pathetic. Sensing that her dance has utterly failed to produce the desired effect, she goes right up to the unheeding Customer, places her elbow on the table, cups her face in her hands, and peers at him ardently. This, at least, he cannot fail to notice. But he only parodies her gesture, grins at her, and then knocks her elbow from the table. Defeated, she returns to her colleagues.

The Customer, though now very drunk, must make his choice. Ordering another bottle, he beckons to Venus. But by the time she has reached him, he has succumbed to the effects of the wine. As he slumps forward, the other two entertainers and the Waiter rush across to him and help Venus to relieve him of his valuables.

The score of the *Judgment of Paris* consists of six numbers, plus a brief coda-finale. The following table indicates their origins in the *Dreigroschenoper* score:

No. 1. *Moritat*. Two verses, leading to introduction only of *Pollys Lied*

No. 2. *Kanonen Song*

No. 3. *Eifersuchtsduett*

No. 4. *Barbarasong*, starting at the refrain 'Ja da kann man'

No. 5. *Seerauberjenny*

No. 6. Introduction to *Pollys Lied*

Finale: First *Dreigroschenfinale* (Act I), last 16 bars only