

BRECHT VERSUS OPERA

Some Comments

David Drew

No apologies for Brecht. (But he's so *aggressive*, you say. To which he would reply:

. . . Alas, we
 who wanted to prepare for friendliness
 could not ourselves be friendly.)¹

It would be interesting to discuss how so intelligent and serious a man can write something as silly as footnote 6 to the *Mahagonny*-commentary: or how he comes to add the all-important footnote 8 to a paragraph as wild as the one dealing with *Gebrauchsmusik*. But a book could be written about that. What really matters is that Brecht was one of the few major-poet-dramatists of this century, or any other, to have concerned himself with the nature and function of the musical theatre. He asked some very awkward questions, and the Third Reich gave us an excuse for not thinking about them. But now it is time we did, because 'the New Opera' is no more healthy today than it was in 1930, and because, incidentally, cultural history has caught us by surprise, and has faced us once again with the rude and trouble-making *Mahagonny* which we had all thought safely buried. Even if we reject Brecht's politico-economic remedies (which we are entitled to do so long as we do not try to pretend that they are inessential to his art) we still cannot ignore the dry-rot which he discovered in the structure of opera.

First, it is important that there be no confusion about what Brecht meant by *kulinarisch*. The word, used in an aesthetic sense, is not peculiar to Brecht, and I am grateful to Marc Blitzstein for pointing out that Bizet employed it in a letter to his publisher Choudens in August 1869, where he referred to the 'artistic and culinary' jobs with which a composer is concerned. Bizet probably intended the word to cover that part of the creative process which is purely a matter of craftsmanship. It is here that the artist becomes especially committed to formulating his Idea in the clearest possible way. The principle of 'communication' remains fundamental to the word 'culinary' in its Brechtian application, but it has acquired cultural implications by virtue of its tendency towards the 'satisfaction' of the public. Wherever public success is the primary object, and inspiration is wholly subject to that end, the result is *Kitsch*. However, the 'culinary' work is not necessarily *Kitsch*, and it is obvious that Brecht sometimes uses the word 'culinary' merely as an antonym to 'esoteric'.

¹ From *An die Nachgeborenen*.

This is undoubtedly the case when he describes *Mahagonny* as a culinary opera. Here, *kulinarisch* has something of the colloquial sense of 'box-office', used adjectivally.

Was, and is, *Mahagonny* 'box-office'? Yes: the window which sooner or later closes remorselessly on even the most successful *Kitsch* remains open for *Mahagonny*. It is also the window at which the public buys its tickets for *Rigoletto* or *Carmen*, and if *Mahagonny* is hardly the equal of those works, its character is no less reputable and no less serious. It differs from them only in its occasional satire on the commercial product. But this is a very small part of the total musical organism, and because the 'attitude' which the composer adopts towards commercial music is that of a highly intelligent and sensitive musician, the object of the satire fades into the background and we respond only to the musical subject.

Brecht's requirement that the composer 'show attitudes' is somewhat obscure if it is not considered in relation to the music. In his essay on music in the Epic Theatre, he remarks that in *Mahagonny* Weill was not always successful in 'showing attitudes'. He was doubtless thinking of such things as the wonderful E minor 'Kraniche' duet in Act 2. Brecht had reason to fear the seductive power of music, however much he might love it. If the intrinsic worth of a musical setting of his text was too great, the audience would not be in a proper frame of mind to hear what he had to say. The music written for Brecht's plays by Weill's successors is almost always interesting, and makes a vital contribution to the dramatic whole. But even with a composer of the quality of Hanns Eisler² the music does not challenge the supremacy of the words. Now the 'Kraniche' duet is sheer music-making, and on a high level: indeed it is one of the very few thoroughly convincing examples of pure diatonic polyphony to have been written in Germany between the wars. But its astonishingly delicate lyricism is dangerous from the Brechtian point of view, for it compels the onlooker to identify himself with the feelings of the protagonists. It 'provides him with sensations' instead of 'forcing him to take decisions'.

The so-called *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation-effect, by which Brecht sought to secure the critical detachment of his audiences, has as profound an influence on the form of an opera as it does on that of a play. The method was not without its precedents in the modern musical theatre (though of course its indebtedness to the ancient theatrical traditions of China and Japan is more far-reaching). *The Soldier's Tale* of Stravinsky and Ramuz could almost be regarded as a prototype of the Brechtian theatre, both as regard to form and content, whilst *Oedipus Rex* was certainly influential in purely formal respects.³ It is noteworthy that Busoni, who was so fascinated by *The Soldier's Tale*, should have formulated operatic principles which also

² Whose sixtieth birthday in August 1958 will no doubt pass unnoticed in the Western world.

³ The obvious reference to *Oedipus* (with its Latin text) in Brecht's *Mahagonny*—commentary is interesting, not least because Brecht recognizes the work to be superior to the others which he refers to obliquely. (It would appear that these are, respectively, Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*, Max Brand's *Machinist Hopkins*, Weill's *Royal Palace*, and Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*.) Weill too was very impressed by *Oedipus*; according to Heinz Joachim he applauded its first Berlin performance excitedly, and shouted 'Das muss man nur einfach nachmachen!' However, in his two subsequent operas, *Der Jasager* and *Die Bürgschaft*, the influence of *Oedipus* is entirely absorbed, and there can be no question of imitation. These two works are indeed the only reputable heirs of *Oedipus* that have so far reached the operatic stage.

anticipate the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*; and that Weill, a pupil of Busoni, should have written his first opera⁴ in collaboration with Georg Kaiser, the Expressionist dramatist who described his own plays as 'a device for keeping reality at a distance'. (Kaiser belonged to an earlier generation than Brecht and Weill, but he was one of those whom Brecht admired.)

Formally speaking, Brecht's main propositions—the rejection of linear plot-structure and traditional characterization, for instance—are full of possibilities for the opera composer. Certain limitations, such as the impossibility of writing a through-composed opera on Brechtian lines, suggest that 'Epic Opera' is most naturally suited to a post-Stravinskian idiom. *Mahagonny* itself is a number-opera, and, with one or two very striking exceptions, it dispenses with recitative altogether. The work is, I think, quite inimitable, and if a model for an Epic Opera is required, it would be more profitable to turn to *Die Bürgschaft*, which Weill wrote in 1931 to a libretto by Brecht's collaborator, Caspar Neher.

The first half of *Die Bürgschaft* is based on a very beautiful parable from Alexander Herder's *Der Afrikanischer Rechtspruch*. The second half continues directly from the first, and uses the same 'characters', but it is intended as an antithesis to what has gone before, rather than as a development of it. The leading rôles are in fact not so much 'characters' as 'figures'—a distinction which Kaiser makes in his own plays—and they therefore cannot evolve according to the convention of European theatre. Since they are designed not to have any dynamic life of their own, they can be moved, like tin soldiers, into positions remote from, or even opposite to, those which they had occupied earlier. This rejection of the tradition of character-realism has become a commonplace in the modern novel, but it is still regarded as somewhat outrageous in the theatre, even though the history of other cultures should show us how very limited and limiting the Western theatre is in this respect. It was very clear that the degree of character-stylization achieved by Auden and Stravinsky in *The Rake's Progress* was disagreeable to many critics. The same critics attacked the episode of the bread-machine, which is almost a 'moral tableau' in the Brechtian sense,⁵ and 'shows attitudes' in a way that is both original and meaningful.

But to return to *Die Bürgschaft*. The whole of the second half of the opera is a remarkable illustration of what Brecht meant by music which 'takes up a position' *vis-à-vis* the text, instead of merely illustrating it. The libretto for this section of the opera is concerned with the complete breakdown of humane values after the establishment of an authoritarian, militarist, government. But the violence and degradation depicted on the stage is not echoed in the music, which is entirely 'humane' and positive in feeling. Music and text thus develop on quite independent lines, and yet achieve a unity that is as subtle as it is strong. The effect is enhanced by the eminently Brechtian use of two choruses—a large one on the stage, with an important dramatic rôle, and a small one in the orchestra with a purely choric function.

⁴ *Der Protagonist*.

⁵ It is worth remembering that the Auden of the 1920's and early 1930's was much influenced by Brecht. (Compare his *Dance of Death* with *Mahagonny*.)

Die Bürgschaft is a revolutionary opera in every sense and it has suffered as such. Inevitably it was banned in the Third Reich, and when it was eventually revived in October 1957 by the Berlin Städtischer Oper, a well-meaning attempt was made to render the work 'safe' and 'inoffensive', by changing the whole emphasis and eliminating certain of the more inflammatory passages.⁶ The work is by no means flawless or uncuttable but the revisions revealed a total misunderstanding of the nature of its originality. The emasculation of *Die Bürgschaft* in Berlin last year gives ample justification to the second paragraph of Brecht's *Mahagonny*-commentary. Truly the 'apparatus' had taken control of the product—an ironic turn of events since Brecht himself had criticized *Die Bürgschaft* for attempting the dangerous compromise with 'bourgeois' operatic tastes!

Throughout his career Brecht was always committed to a revolutionary position. He might well have echoed the words of Wagner who wrote: 'My task is this: to bring revolution wherever I go.' The fervently anti-Wagnerian character of Brecht's ethos benefits from the ambivalence of Weill's musical setting, where one is constantly aware of a suppressed but still powerful Wagnerian influence both in the harmony and the melody. The influence extends to the most unlikely places: compare for instance the introduction to the famous blues in Act 2, *Denn wie man sich bettet*, with the Introduction to Act 3 of *Tristan*. Although Weill is so fittingly complementary to Brecht, we must recognize how much they have in common. The aggressive quality is self-evident in Brecht. With Weill it is inherent in the harmony and rhythm, and above all in the masterly and wholly novel accompanimental textures. On the other hand, Weill's essentially humane feeling is easily sensed, whereas Brecht, who was more of a classicist, achieved an expressive effect without any direct appeal to the senses. Yet his humane impulses were no less active than Weill's. Looking back on *Mahagonny*, after thirty years, it is important that we recognize that it amounts to much more than a mere gesture of iconoclasm. The questions which Brecht asked so fiercely sprang from a deep concern for the human condition, in relation to which the honourable status and the vitality of the Arts must at all costs be preserved. Habit and Fashion are the forerunners of cultural death, and artists who are habitually conservative or fashionably progressive could well consider these words of Brecht, for they are as respectful of life as they are of art:

'We particularly ask you—
When a thing continually occurs—
Not on that account to find it natural,
In an age of bloody confusion
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things
Be held unalterable.'

⁶ I have discussed these revisions at some length in an article published in *Music and Letters*, June 1958. This article also contains a more detailed account than I have been able to give here of the 'dramatic counterpoint' provided by the music in the second part of *Die Bürgschaft*.