

## The Bürgschaft Debate and the Timeliness of the Untimely

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Consideration of the libretto of *Die Bürgschaft* must begin, as the libretto itself begins, with Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). A man of encyclopedic intelligence, and one of the fathers of classical German humanism, Herder is the link between rationalism and romanticism, between Lessing and *Sturm und Drang*. His parable "Der afrikanische Rechtsspruch" [The African Judgement] stands like a sentinel of reason opposite the stormy and stressful opening page of *Die Bürgschaft*:

Alexander of Macedon once arrived in a remote and wealthy African province. The inhabitants brought him bowls of perfect golden fruit. "Eat this fruit at home," said Alexander; "I have not come to see your riches, but to learn of your customs." Then they led him to the market place, where their king was sitting in judgment. At that moment a citizen stepped forward and spoke: "O King, I have bought from this man a sack of grain and have found in it an unexpected treasure. The grain is mine but not the gold; and this man will not take it back. Speak to him, O King, for it is his." And his opponent, who was also a citizen of that place, answered: "You are afraid of keeping something not your own: should I not be afraid to accept such a thing from you? I sold you the sack, including everything that was in it. Take what is yours. Speak to him, O King!" The King asked the first man if he had a son. "Yes," he answered. The King then asked the other if he had a daughter, and again the answer was yes. "Good," said the King, "you are both righteous people; join your children in marriage, and give them the treasure as dowry — that is my decision."

Alexander was astonished at this verdict. "Are you astonished because I have pronounced unjustly?" asked the King. "By no means," answered Alexander, "but in our country the verdict would be different." "In what way?" asked the African King. "Both parties would lose their heads," Alexander replied, "and the gold would go to the King."

The King clasped his hands, and said: "Does the sun shine in your land too, and does the rain still fall from the heavens?" "Yes," replied Alexander. "Then," said the King, "that must be because of the innocent animals who live in your land; for on such a people no sun can shine and no rain can fall."

The opera treats the parable very freely and excludes the historical references. The time is unspecified, the place an imaginary country called Urb. Until its unhappy change of fortune, Urb is sparsely populated and predominantly agricultural:

**prologue**

The cattle dealer Johann Mattes returns in despair from the gambling dens of the capital city, and confesses to his wife that all is lost and that the Creditors are after him. She advises him to seek help from the corn dealer David Orth, who lives on the other side of the great river. Mattes leaves. By the time he returns with Orth, the Creditors are already removing the furniture from his house. Orth declares that since he regards Mattes as his "best customer," he will, for a given period, stand surety for him. The Creditors agree, and before long Mattes discharges his debts.

**act i**

Mattes buys from Orth two sacks of grain, in which he later finds a hidden hoard of money. Assuming, from misconstrued evidence, that the money was not Orth's and has not been missed, he decides to keep it and tell nobody. Three Blackmailers uncover his secret and start to threaten him, where upon he hastens back to Orth. But Orth questions his own right to the money and persuades the astonished Mattes to let the case be decided by the Judge, whose wisdom is renowned throughout Urb.

**act ii**

In Solomonic fashion, the Judge decrees that the money shall be divided between Jakob Orth and Luise Mattes when they are older.

The Great Power, whose actions, according to the Judge, are determined solely by the laws of money [*Geld*] and of power [*Macht*], now invades the land of Urb. While the Commissar announces the 'new order,' and defines its political and economic objectives, the Judge is heard advocating passive resistance. To discredit him and at the same time to demonstrate his own absolute power, the Commissar re-examines the case of Orth and Mattes, declares both men to be criminals, and releases them on condition that they serve the new regime – a task in which they will be assisted by the Three Blackmailers, whom he had already recruited as his Agents when they stopped him at the City Gates.

**act iii**

Six years have passed. Urb is now industrialized. But the Great Power has fulfilled no promises other than those implicit in the twin laws of Money and Power. The rich – Mattes and Orth – have grown richer, the poor, poorer. In a succession of four apocalyptic visions, Urb is visited by War, Inflation, Famine and Disease. When

at last the people seek to overthrow the system and destroy their oppressors, Orth saves his own life by offering Mattes as a sacrifice to the mob – who lynch him. As the curtain falls, Orth proclaims the triumph of Money and Power.

While the dénouement of *Die Bürgschaft* recalls the Herder who first welcomed the French Revolution and was then appalled by the violence it unleashed, the underlying tendency of the libretto reverses Herder's view of history as a process of education towards an ideal *Humanität*, in order that the music can achieve true freedom by reaffirming it.

In 1931 there was every reason to reassert the values of Weimar humanism. But why this particular fragment of Herder? The question cannot be answered without going further into the origin of the fragment. Neither the score nor the program book for the world premiere identified the source of the parable; but two contemporary critics noted without further comment that the text was from Herder's *Blätter der Vorzeit* [Leaves of Antiquity]. Bearing the subtitle "Dichtungen aus der morgenländischen Sage" [Poems from Oriental Legend], the *Blätter* are only one of several such collections dating from 1780-81; in fact, "Der afrikanische Rechtsspruch" comes not from the *Blätter*, but from the *Jüdische Parabeln*. This, it is true, is a purely formal distinction, since the whole anthology of parables, including the *Blätter*, is of Jewish origin and was a parergon to Herder's great work, *Vom Geist der ebraïschen Poesie* [The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry, 1782-1787].

"Der afrikanische Rechtsspruch" is one of two parables identical in content with two of the *Proben rabbinischer Weisheit* [Samples of Rabbinical Wisdom] published in 1775 by Lessing's friend Moses Mendelssohn, the "Jewish Luther" and the most famous son of Weill's home town of Dessau (where Herder's study of Hebrew poetry was first published). Some of Mendelssohn's *Proben* were adapted from the Talmud, others from the Midrash. The parable corresponding to Herder's "Der afrikanische Rechtsspruch" comes from the *Baba Metzia* [The Middle Gate], a section of the Talmud dealing with questions of property. Thus Herder's "African King" represents the rabbinical teaching; in the Talmud he is a King Katzya, the ruler of a country beyond the mysterious "dark mountains" (surely a part of that same philosophical range that Weill had already descried in *Der Jasager*). According to Deuteronomy, man's first duty is to Justice and Righteousness, and his next, to Sacrifices. There is thus a clear progression from the sacrificial drama of *Der Jasager* to the judicial-social drama of *Die Bürgschaft*, whose title has a

double meaning: literally it is "The Surety" provided by Orth; symbolically it is "The Pledge" of Man to Justice, a pledge symbolized by the rainbow of Genesis and the Covenant. Among Herder's *Blätter der Vorzeit* is "Die Bürgschaft des Menschengeschlechts" [The Pledge of the Human Race]. But for German audiences the title "Die Bürgschaft" would be most likely to suggest quite another connection with classical Weimar – Schiller's famous poem "Die Bürgschaft" (on which Schubert based his long-forgotten opera of the same name).

The versions of the parable given by Herder, Mendelssohn, and the Talmud differ only in details of time and color. Mendelssohn's Alexander does not speak of executing the two men, but only of taking them into custody; and both Mendelssohn and Herder dispense with the King's double curse on Alexander. Although Herder's version is the most elegant, even the most dramatic, of the three, this alone could not have favored the choice of his paraphrase in preference to the original text, which Weill may well have read during his years in Dessau and recalled during the bicentennial year in 1929, when the Mendelssohn Jubiläumsausgabe was initiated in Berlin. In 1932 (when the Jubilee edition was complete) Weill told an interviewer that he had found the parable in "a book" he had possessed "since childhood."<sup>1</sup> Even he, in his most iconoclastic vein, would hardly have used such a formulation had he meant the Talmud. But Mendelssohn's *Proben* and Herder's *Vom Geist der ebraischen Poesie* are just the kind of gifts which the young Weill's devout parents might have thought of. For the adult Weill, Herder had the singular advantage that he presented the old rabbinical teaching in a non-denominational and (in this instance) ostensibly secular form. Moreover, the choice of Herder rather than Mendelssohn involved a pleasing symmetry. Herder and Mendelssohn were the two sides of an equilateral triangle whose base was Lessing; and each had crossed the borders of their given faiths, to meet at the point where Judaism and Christianity are one.

Within a year, propagandists of the Third Reich were misappropriating Herder – an East Prussian gentile – in the cause of the new nationalism. Meanwhile, Nazi critics of *Die Bürgschaft* ignored or were unaware

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1 The citation for this quotation is not presently at hand, but will be included when the study of *Die Bürgschaft* is published in its complete form in my forthcoming *Kurt Weill: Works, 1927-33*, from which this essay has been extracted and adapted; that chapter will, of course, focus comparable attention on musical content.

of its Talmudic background and contented themselves with the charge that Herder was fundamentally irrelevant to the work itself and to its "Jewish-Marxist" aspirations. Behind such nonsense there was a point worth making: Hanslick's charge that Wagner spoilt the Parsifal legend by introducing new elements which he failed to integrate has some bearing on Weill and Neher's treatment of their parable. In Herder and in the Talmud the juridical issue is clear: the seller of the grain knew nothing about the gold in his sacks, for it was not his and he had not put it there. Treasure trove, according to natural law, is shared equally between the first finder and the owner of the property on which it has been found. In the parable, however, the issue is morally if not legally complicated by the sale of goods and by the seller's reluctance to take the money back. The King modifies the law in the interests of common sense and human understanding.

In Weill and Neher's version, it is stated that Orth himself placed the money in the sack, but it is not at all clear how he came by it in the first place; or why he refused to accept Matthes's offer to return it; or indeed why he had seemed so little concerned when his son had first raised the alarm about the missing money. Unlike the Commissar, the Judge asks none of the relevant questions. Having remarked that he sees no grounds for mistrusting Orth, he delivers the selfsame judgment as Herder's King. Equally ill-founded, or so it seems, is Orth's confidence in the reliability of his "best customer."

In the Prologue, his "friendship" with Mattes is defined by the music to which they together sing "We are the same as we always were — he has been my friend for many years." Yet the librettists consistently substitute "customer" for "friend" whenever Orth, on his own, refers to Mattes. Whereas in Herder and the Talmud, Alexander's world is entirely foreign to that of the King, in *Die Bürgschaft* mercenary interests are common to both worlds. The antithesis is of another kind. To paraphrase the opera's motto: the nature of money does not change; but its influence is changed according to the changed ideals and priorities of society, and hence to the economic system which is believed to express them best.

The system introduced by the Commissar is unquestionably different from its predecessor. In the first version of his monologue before the city gates, the Commissar merely observes that his is a system that needs "new soil for the fortification of its existence," but in the second version, he goes on to declare:

I will not rest until a net of railways passes through this country. I will not rest until this country lives from the products of our country.

In his pamphlet "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" (1917), Lenin writes:

Railways are a summation of the basic capitalist industries: coal, iron and steel: a summation and the most striking index of the development of world trade and bourgeois-democratic civilization ... The building of railways seems to be a simple, natural, democratic, cultural and civilizing enterprise ... But in fact the capitalist threads, which in thousands of different inter-crossings bind these enterprises with private property ... have converted this railway construction into an instrument for oppressing a *thousand million* people (in the colonies and semi-colonies).

"The railways were completed," reports the (alto solo) narrator at the start of the third act of *Die Bürgschaft*, "the towns grew, and many waited for the better times they had been promised." But those times are not for "the many." The "system," which seems to operate according to Marx's law of the concentration of capital, ensures that only the wealthy prosper. The Great Power's struggle for new markets leads to war (and would do so inevitably, according to Marxian prognoses for monopoly capitalism). In its turn, war precipitates a series of political and economic crises, beginning with Inflation.

Neither in its assumed causes nor in itself is the Inflation scene indebted to even a semblance of economic theory, whether Marx's or anyone else's. But what it lacks in science it makes up for in its sense of post-1918 German history. While the same sense is discernible in the scene that links Inflation with Hunger – and here Weill's tone and line-drawing suggests nothing so much as the art of his senior contemporary Käthe Kollwitz – Orth's heartless speculation with grain is clearly placed within a framework of references to British colonialism that Neher stressed with his costume-designs for the Commissar (who has the typically British surname Ellis) and for his Adjutant. Chapter and verse for the granary episode may be cited in the first volume of *Das Kapital*, where Marx discusses the great Hindu famines "manufactured" by the English in 1769-70 and again in 1866. But the ramifications from that are considerable and merit discussion in a later context; for the Hunger scene, as Weill composed it (though not as his libretto defines it), marks a decisive change in the "Haltung" of the suffering populace.

While the choice of Hunger rather than Famine for the titling of the third apocalyptic doorway may reflect a strictly European experience, and one with which the Germany of 1931 was once again being directly and painfully familiarized, the avoidance of biblical overtones in the titling of the fourth door results in an understatement more apparent than real. "Krankheit" has a double significance that "Pestilenz" lacks but Weill and Neher's double scene of hospital and dance floor emphatically demands: on the one level there is the (undiagnosed but mortal) "sickness" of Anna Mattes; on the other there is the (partly diagnosed, and according to that diagnosis, equally mortal) "sickness" of a social system based only on power and money — a society represented by the *Totentanz* of Luise Mattes, for whom there are no longer any bonds of kinship or fellow-feeling, and hence no experienced past or imagined future.

Unless the opera were to end there — rather as if *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* had ended with the "Benares Song" — there had to be a fifth door. Although unspecified in the libretto and ignored by Neher's stage designs, it is palpably there; and its name is Revolution. The Revolution is against the "system," but the Commissar is never called to account. Throughout Act III he remains as invisible, and presumably as invincible, as the Great Power itself. Of the system's two collaborators, it is the weaker who forfeits his life to the lynch mob. Orth, who has betrayed him, remains to the last an unrepentant advocate of "Geld und Macht."

To what extent, then, is Orth to be seen and heard as a representative of triumphant capitalism? In Marx's instinctively theatrical imagination, "My Lord, Capital" was a werewolf, and greed "the inhuman power" underlying all political economy. Brute force, Marx declared, is the basis of the colonial system, for it is the means whereby the feudal mode of production can most swiftly be transformed into the capitalist mode. "Force," he concluded, "is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is in itself an economic power." Marx's version of the Fichtean *Macht-Idee* is not, however, so relevant to *Die Bürgschaft* as Fichte himself: "Between states there is neither law nor right save the law of the strongest." In *Die Bürgschaft* the sole adversary of that law is the Judge, whose own law is plainly not Marx's.

Because of difficulties with the ending of *Die Bürgschaft*, Weill overran his own deadline by several weeks. He scornfully rejected Otto Klemperer's draft of a religious ending and eventually settled for one

which is profoundly non-committal. Only after the work had been completed and the vocal score published did Carl Ebert succeed in persuading him and Neher to rewrite and expand the Commissar's Act II entry scene. The result was more than just a local improvement that converted a weak scene into a strong one, both musically and dramatically. Through its re-examination and development of the fundamental conflict between the Commissar's world and the Judge's, it became an essential contribution to the understanding of the opera as a whole.

Like the "revolutionary" chorus throughout the greater part of the Act III finale of *Die Bürgschaft*, the Judge is an invisible presence: supported at first by three off-stage horns and later by the whole crowd-chorus, he is heard denouncing the Commissar and his empty promises and enjoining his compatriots to adopt a policy of passive resistance. The reference is directly political, and, as such, unique in Weill's German stage works. In 1930 Mahatma Gandhi had been arrested by the British authorities, ostensibly because of his symbolic act of opposition to British salt monopoly. Furnished with a legalistic cover for yet another exasperated reaction to Gandhi's lifelong, principled, and law-abiding opposition, the administration achieved none of its own ends, but merely enhanced the already immense moral authority of its captive, drew further international attention to his beliefs and his mission, and exposed yet again the flaws and inconsistencies inherent in even the more enlightened of colonial systems.

Although the flag under which the Great Power marches into the land of Urb is never unfurled, the draft version of the "Kleiner Marsch" confirms that Weill as well as Neher originally had the Union Jack in mind and wished to ensure that not even the most parochial of German opera-goers was left in any doubt about that. But in making the orchestral score of the march, Weill removed from the trio section the all-revealing quotation of "It's a long way to Tipperary" and substituted a tune of his own which sounds altogether more sinister, and wholly un-British. It was characteristic of him to expunge from his score the one element that inclined towards satirical reportage and clearly related to the intention or even to the substance of his contemporaneous (and now lost) score for the 1931 production of Brecht's *Mann ist Mann*. It was also far-sighted; for it preserved, at the central turning-point, that air of timeless mythology from which the opera's inherent modernity continues to draw its staying-power. A mere three years after the premiere of *Die Bürgschaft* the final version of the "Kleiner Marsch" could aptly have accompanied

newsreel clips of Mussolini's troops entering Addis Abbeba. By the same token, the Commissar himself has already long outlived the last British Viceroy; and the Judge continues to have a life of his own that is wholly independent from the triumphs and failures of his immediate model.

Significantly, there was not a single reference either to Ghandi or to the British Raj in any of the contemporary notices and reviews of *Die Bürgschaft*; and like the Talmud's King Katzya and the land beyond the "dark mountains," the entire topic has been ignored in all subsequent *Bürgschaft* literature. From the outset it was vital that the image of the Judge should be removed from the actuality of its model. For immediately behind the model stands one of the driving-forces of the entire opera: not Marx, but Tolstoy.

The "Letter to a Hindu" which Tolstoy completed in Yasnaya Polyana on 14 December 1908 is headed by a Vedic quotation: "All that exists is One. People only call this One by different names." Tolstoy was answering a letter from the editor of the periodical *Free Hindustan*, and writing expressly as a Christian for whom (in a Vedic gloss which he also quoted) "God is one whole; we are the parts." To the editor he wrote:

The reason for the astonishing fact that a majority of working people submit to a handful of idlers who control their labor and their very lives is always and everywhere the same — whether the oppressors and oppressed are of one race or whether, as in India and elsewhere, the oppressors are of a different nation.

This phenomenon seems particularly strange in India, where more than two hundred million people, highly gifted both physically and mentally, find themselves in the power of a small group of people quite alien to them in thought, and immeasurably inferior to them in religious morality.<sup>2</sup>

The question of how to right such injustices was one with which Tolstoy had wrestled in the tract which he published that same year under the title "I cannot be silent." Prompted by a newspaper report that twenty Russian peasants (later corrected to twelve) had been hanged for attacking the property of a wealthy landowner, the tract began by observing that such hangings had become a commonplace in recent times, always with the excuse that they are a means of restoring "peace and order." Directly addressing the powers-that-be, he continued:

2 Leo Tolstoy, "A Letter To a Hindu," in *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London, 1952), pp. 416-17.

You say the atrocities committed by the revolutionaries are terrible. I do not dispute it. I will add that besides being terrible they are stupid, and — like your own actions — fall beside the mark. Yet however terrible and stupid may be their action ... still all these deeds do not come anywhere near the criminality and stupidity of the deeds you commit. They are doing just the same as you and for the same motives. They are in the same ... delusion that men, having formed for themselves a plan of what in their opinion is the desirable and proper arrangement of society, have the right and possibility of arranging other people's lives according to that plan ... You government people call the activities of the revolutionaries "atrocities" and "great crimes": but the revolutionaries have done and are doing nothing that you have not done, and done to an incomparably greater extent ... All that you can adduce for your own justification, they can equally adduce for theirs; not to mention that you do much evil that they do not commit, such as squandering the wealth of the nation, preparing for war, making war, subduing and oppressing foreign nationalities, and so forth.

You say you have the traditions of the past to guard and the actions of the great men of the past as examples. They, too, have their traditions, also arising from the past — even before the French Revolution. And as to great men, models to copy, martyrs for truth and freedom — they have no fewer than you. So that if there is any difference between you, it is only that you wish everything to remain as it has been and is, while they wish for a change. And in thinking that everything cannot always remain as it has been, they would be more right than you, had they not adopted from you that curious, destructive delusion that one set of men can know the form of life suitable for all men in the future and that this form can be established by force.<sup>3</sup>

Tolstoy's proposed solution of the revolutionary dilemma, as he saw it, was admirably quoted by Gandhi in his November 1909 introduction to the first Hindu translation of "A Letter to a Hindu," as an indication of the price that must be paid if the English were to be removed from India: "Do not resist evil, but do not yourselves participate in evil." Gandhi told his readers that Tolstoy had been devoting his life to the development of an alternative to violence as a means of removing tyranny or securing reform. That method, which Gandhi himself was to term Passive Resistance, became in the spring of 1910 the topic of an historic exchange of letters between the two men. Gandhi was then in South Africa, putting their joint principles into practice. Passive Re-

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3 Ibid., pp. 404-05.

sistance is precisely the policy proposed by the Judge and endorsed by his people in the "New Scene" for the second act of *Die Bürgschaft*.

The nature and extent of Weill's commitment to Tolstoyan ideals within and beyond the socio-political sphere cannot be determined on the strength of *Die Bürgschaft* alone, any more than the agreements and differences between Tolstoy and Ghandi – not least about socialism – can be determined on the strength of their correspondence from 1910. Tolstoy was to remain a major influence on the nexus of ideas linking *Die Bürgschaft* to *Der Silbersee*, *Der Kuhhandel*, *Der Weg der Verheißung*, *Johnny Johnson*, and finally – after a 13-year gap – *Lost in the Stars*. It was in *Die Bürgschaft*, though, that Weill first gave creative substance to the impeccably Tolstoyan sentiment he had expressed in a letter to his sister written from Berlin in 1924: "Now those who have nothing are better off because they can at least keep their conscience and their behavior [Haltung] pure."<sup>4</sup> Somewhere in the background there already seems to be looming *Die Bürgschaft's* obsession with what Tolstoy called – in "A Great Iniquity" – "the evil and injustice of private property in land." But in *Die Bürgschaft* the very idea of "property," of "Besitz," seems to carry a curse which owes as much to Wagner's *Ring* as to Tolstoy or, for that matter, Proudhon. With the loss of it, and the lust for its recovery, the action begins; with the eventual renunciation of it in the interests of a future generation – for which it is equitably held in trust – the first parable ends (much as Tolstoy ended the "Going to Law" episode in *The Wisdom of Children*); and with the Judge's quotation from Seneca the second parable opens its indictment of the Great Power and its crass materialism.

From the music's standpoint, what was wrong with the religious ending suggested by Klemperer in 1932 was equally wrong with the humanistic reconciliation scene which Carl Ebert and his colleagues imposed on Neher in their well-meaning 1957 revival of *Die Bürgschaft*. The fault did not lie with the nature of the commitment, nor even with the sanctimonious expression of it, but rather with that failure of nerve

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4 Letter dated 29 May [1924] from Weill to Ruth and Leo Sohn; Weill-Lenya Research Center; the paragraph in German: "Aber Ihr wißt ja, wie ich über Gelddinge denke, u. es gibt keine schönere Bestätigung für meine überlegene, fast ironische Einstellung zu allen finanziellen Angelegenheiten als die augenblickliche wirtschaftliche Lage Deutschlands. Da haben sie geschachert und spekuliert u. sich verrückt gemacht – u. jetzt sind doch die am besten dran, die nichts haben, weil sie wenigstens ihre Gesinnung u. ihre Haltung rein erhalten haben."

which so often occurs when the circumspect and the non-committal are mistaken for the indecisive, and the costs of a hasty decision are confused with the rewards of a swift one. For Weill and Neher, the risk of seeming merely evasive was strongest with regard to the Commissar and the "power" (with or without a capital) he was meant to personify. At the time when they were writing their libretto, fascism was too young and imperialism too old for the distinctions between them to be self-evident, and the possibility of casting the Commissar as a representative of both phenomena must have seemed particularly attractive during the period of Japan's successful attack on Manchuria (1931-32). Nevertheless, the harmonic and rhythmic flabbiness of the triple-time music associated with the Commissar's first pronouncement suggests that Weill was not as clear about the kind of "Power" that was invading the land of Urb as he became when he wrote the new scene which follows and wisely cut much of the foregoing triple-time music.

But for the political events that culminated in the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Weill and Neher would have had two urgent inducements for carrying out their intended revision of the entire second Act: on the one hand, the postponed but already announced Berlin revival towards the end of the 32-33 season; on the other, and commandingly, the projected Vienna State Opera premiere under Clemens Krauss. Such a revision would have been inconceivable unless it carried through to its logical end the process that had begun with the de-Anglicized final version of the "Kleiner Marsch" and then continued with not only the "New Scene" itself but also the balancing revision of the Act II finale, where the voice of the Judge is added to the final ensemble, in order for him to reaffirm both his denunciation of the Great Power's concepts of justice and his advocacy of passive resistance.

That is the last that is heard of the Judge, and indeed of the Commissar. Their removal from the scene, though not – at least in the Commissar's case – from the underlying drama, can hardly have been unconsidered; but in the light of Shakespearean and other precedents, the dramatic, literary, and purely conceptual problems it entailed were either underestimated or, more probably, simply discounted by a composer-librettist who had for many years been confident of the power of his music precisely to define the evident truth or evoke the impalpable presence. The ultimate demonstration of that confidence lies in the almost unrelieved negativity of his and Neher's libretto – a libretto that embodies all its hope and faith in the frail person of the Judge and pertina-

ciously rejects every other opportunity of indicating that either the individual or the community is capable of acting selflessly, let alone idealistically or heroically.

This, above all, was the problem that in 1932 exercised the minds of most critics and writers who were favorably disposed towards Weill and recognized that *Die Bürgschaft* was perhaps his greatest achievement yet. While the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* was quoting Orth's final words *verbatim* in its newsletter to German theaters and opera houses and commenting that "such notions as character, fidelity, honor, which from time immemorial have constituted the essence of German art, are here, with cynical impertinence, made fun of and befouled," the young Berlin composer/critic Herbert Trantow was posing his "Fragen an Kurt Weill, seine *Bürgschaft* betreffend" in *Melos*. The questions were to some extent rhetorical, but not simply "another form of subjective criticism," as Weill claimed in the rejoinder which he published a month later.<sup>5</sup> Trantow's first and fundamental request was for an explanation of why, after "teaching" in *Der Jasager* that the life of the individual is of less importance than responsibility towards "der Allgemeinheit," *Die Bürgschaft* is once again "negative and destructive"? Weill's reply to this is purely theoretical, largely nebulous, and not at all convincing. It does, however, end revealingly with a statement whose implications for the future were extensive: having declared that he would seize "with both hands" any opportunity to depict something more positive and affirmative from the same (quite undefined!) "philosophical background," he rejects the possibility of doing so in the region of "pure humanity" because – and here, predictably, comes the special pleading and question begging – he believed "that it is today the duty of opera to thrust its way forward from the destiny of private individuals towards a general validity."

It is clear that Weill, because of a deep-seated and wholly understandable refusal ever to discuss his own works in terms of their specific musical structures and aims, is here forced to thump on a tub that is more than half empty. One can hear that beneath the hollow rhetoric

5 Herbert Trantow, "Fragen an Kurt Weill, seine *Bürgschaft* betreffend," *Melos* 11 (August-September 1932): 276-77; Kurt Weill, "Kurt Weill antwortet," *Melos* 11 (October 1932): 336-37. Both are reprinted in Kurt Weill, *Musik und Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera (Berlin, 1990), pp. 105-08. Only Weill's response is translated in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1979), pp. 539-40.

there is still some content, but what it actually amounts to is not revealed until he changes the subject:

*Die Bürgschaft* is not a *Lehrstück* but an opera. It is written for the theater. It does not demonstrate propositions [Lehrsätze – which includes the sense of doctrines or dogmas], but, in accordance with the responsibility of theater, presents human events [*menschliche Vorgänge* – including the sense of examples or models] against the background of a timeless idea.

As to the nature of this “timeless idea,” Weill says precisely nothing but instead changes the subject again and concludes that, because *Die Bürgschaft* is “an attempt to take a position with regard to matters that concern us all,” it inevitably and indeed intentionally provokes discussion.

And what might that “position” be? Here again Weill says nothing. But in this case he has already indicated a position, however vaguely, by his statement that *Die Bürgschaft* was “from the start” conceived as a “tragic” opera as much as an “instructive” one, that it was designed to show situations “in their crassest form and without palliation or euphemism,” and that at the end of the opera there is both “tragedy” and “lesson”: the former “much less in the death of Mattes than in the explanation Orth gives in his closing words” (concerning the omnipotence of power and money), the latter in the (self-evident, or so he imagines) “hopelessness” [*Trostlosigkeit*] of that explanation. In other words, there has to be an alternative to such hopelessness. But if, as Adorno writes in the “Finale” of his *Minima Moralia*, “consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite,” there are only two standpoints from which *Die Bürgschaft* can squarely face it: the first and closest is that of the Judge; the second, further removed and commanding a much broader perspective, is that of the music – about which Weill does not permit himself a single word by way of reply to Trantow, as if he were somehow aware that in quite another context – to be considered later – Trantow’s own musical sympathies and understanding would provide at least a partial answer to the charge of negativity.

The hermeneutics of music in general and this score in particular are so vital to the question of how the text and the drama of *Die Bürgschaft* are to be approached that the significances, if any, attributed to the music by reputable contemporary witnesses, whether hostile or friendly, are too precious to be ignored today – least of all on the grounds that the social and cultural assumptions are to a greater or lesser extent alien

to our own. Among the contemporaries who published considered articles or essays on *Die Bürgschaft*, the one most closely involved with the music and indeed with the work as a whole was perhaps the most eminent and certainly one of the best qualified both as musician and as critic. In his capacity as Intendant of the Wiesbaden Opera, Paul Bekker had himself produced and directed *Die Bürgschaft* immediately after the Berlin premiere, with Karl Rankl conducting. His open letter to Weill – in effect an extended essay in the high German tradition – was included in his volume of *Briefe an zeitgenössische Musiker*, published in Berlin towards the end of 1932.<sup>6</sup> It was one of the very last major essays Bekker wrote and published before he fled from Nazi Germany the following year.

Bekker (1882-1937) had established his reputation and defined his outlook well before World War I. It was not for his political views that he was pilloried by the Nazis, but for his achievements – which in the racist lexicons translated as his “impertinence” – in the field of Austro-German music from Beethoven to Pfitzner, and in that very context his uninhibited advocacy of Mahler, Schreker, and Schoenberg. As a conservative humanist for whom the “unpolitical” Thomas Mann of the 1920s was surely a model, he had in 1931 published the English translation of his critical biography of Wagner (1924); and as such, with candor and finesse, he began his “letter” to Weill with an explanation of why, until (significantly) *Der Jasager*, he had followed Weill’s career without feeling the need to become more closely acquainted with the works he had encountered, including early chamber works, two of the three one-act operas, the *Mahagonny* opera (about which he shared the establishment view that it was a misbegotten offspring of the *Songspiel*), and last but not least *Die Dreigroschenoper*, a “very effective operetta, no less than that, but also no more.” Having quoted to Weill the somewhat reserved verdict on *Die Dreigroschenoper* which he had published in his recent book *Das Operntheater* [1931], he explained that he had measured his words carefully in relation to the “inflammatory din of [Weill’s] propagandists.”

Elegantly written as it is, the letter up to this point could almost have been dictated by Weill’s exact contemporary, Ernst Krenek, the youngest of the composers promoted by Bekker and a member of his staff in Kas-

6 Paul Bekker, “An Kurt Weill,” in *Briefe an zeitgenössische Musiker* (Berlin, 1932), pp. 103ff. Reprinted in David Drew, ed., *Über Kurt Weill* (Berlin 1975), pp. 85-92. An abridged version had been published in the *Vossische Zeitung* of 9 November 1932.

sel and Wiesbaden during the period 1925-27. In *Das Operntheater* Bekker had suggested that *Die Dreigroschenoper* might contain the seeds of "a new kind of *Volksoper*" – something far removed from Krenek's preoccupations and capabilities at that time – and in his letter to Weill he now patronizingly congratulates him (on what evidence he does not say) for having originally conceived *Die Bürgschaft* as a *Volksoper*. Granting that it had turned out to be a full-blown opera, albeit of a new kind, he hastens to explain that by calling it "new" he does not mean that it is a model to be copied, for its structure is less than satisfactory and its subject-matter highly debatable. For him, *Die Bürgschaft* is new simply because "someone has thrust open a door, and fresh air is drawn into a humid and stuffy room."

Bekker then recalls that in an (unspecified) article preparatory to his Wiesbaden production he had warned prospective opera-goers against overrating the content of the libretto and directed their attention to the higher concern of developing new yet traditionally-grounded solutions for the formal and conceptual problems inherent in opera.<sup>7</sup> The advantages of re-routing his audience in this way were demonstrated a few days later, so he declared (with an express disclaimer of any "opportunistic" intentions), when certain Berlin reviewers of the *Bürgschaft* premiere hailed the discovery of "die neue soziale Oper" – literally "the new social opera," but with political overtones which would dominate the remainder of Bekker's letter. Mentioning no names, Bekker deplored the current overestimation and misunderstanding of the role of subject-matter in opera. He regarded the choice of *political* subject-matter as one of the most dangerous consequences of this tendency, and *Die Bürgschaft* was proof that "even" if Weill's invention had been ignited by the political element in his material, the important things were the actual combustion and illumination and not the question of whether the wind that fanned the flames was blowing from the left or the right.

One needs to bear in mind that in the midst of all the political and economic difficulties of 1932 Bekker was running an opera house in one of Germany's most fashionable spa towns with a *Generalmusikdirektor* – Rankl – who had long been associated with the Marxist wing of the workers' choral movement, and who in 1930 had conducted the premiere of Eisler and Brecht's notorious *Die Maßnahme*, a "Lehrstück"

<sup>7</sup> Bekker does not identify his "pre-premiere article," and I have been unsuccessful to date in tracing it.

whose subject-matter was wholly political and, at first glance, frankly Leninist. "Have you noticed," Bekker asked Weill, a trifle disingenuously, "that the die-hards among your supporters have already reproached you for the turn from Brecht to Neher, because they rightly discern in that a deviation from the path of pure politics?" What follows, nevertheless, is a disquisition on politics and opera, with reference to *Die Meistersinger* and *Palestrina*. It culminates in the crucial observation that what Weill has usefully derived from the political basis and character of the *Bürgschaft* libretto is not "the lesson about the omnipotence of circumstances in the face of human will," but rather the manner of forming and dividing the choruses and of subordinating the orchestra to the human voice. According to Bekker, the politics of the libretto – whose nature he never defines – vehemently insist upon the centrality of the human being as such and ultimately survive through the equivalent sound-forms they have conjured up. Admitting that this "explanation" may strike some "intellectual reformers" (meaning the radical Left) as mere sophistry, and that they would certainly not be content with any such form of "political actuality," Bekker calls Mozart and Beaumarchais to his aid and concludes by offering Weill some fatherly advice: now that his creative powers have overcome his earlier insecurity, he should try his hand at a real *Volksoper*, in which there could be as many political undertones as he wished.

After nearly sixty years, Bekker's letter no longer seems visibly old-fashioned. Much of it has a familiar ring in an age that is celebrating the end of ideology for the second time since 1945, and little of it seems gratuitous. Although today's "intellectual reformers" are of quite another stamp, few if any of their followers in the world of music would be likely to object to Bekker's ostensibly unpolitical and unblushingly formalistic approach to the topic of political actuality; and even an irreverent aside about "Brecht's rubbish" accords with the new permissiveness and seems in no way to disturb the air of magisterial urbanity that pervades the entire letter. And yet it leaves, as perhaps it always left, a distant and slightly disagreeable impression; for the composer to whom it is addressed is a fiction, not of the author's imagination but of his tactical considerations. Revealingly, the only compliment to the real Weill is contained in Bekker's quotation from his own pre-premiere article, where he expresses his faith in the sincerity and inward integrity of the composer's involvement with his libretto: "because otherwise he would not have been able to write so good and honorable a score." Bekker's

failure to come to terms with the score is pre-determined by his flight from the subject-matter and is entirely of a piece with his contempt for the "Verhältnisse" thesis (which he dismisses at one blow and lumps together with "Brecht's rubbish"). Behind his circumlocutions and sophistries is a deep-seated aversion to any intellectual or ideological interference with the purity of his concept of music-theater as some quasi-spiritual distillation of musical form, somatic rhythm, and theatrical tempo.

The fact that Weill had interrupted his work on *Der Silbersee* — another embryonic *Volksoper*! — in order to reply to Trantow, but never made public any reaction to Bekker, speaks for itself. His debate with the slightly younger Trantow had stemmed from common assumptions about the role and responsibilities of music-theater. If Bekker did not have good reasons for believing that the "Verhältnisse" thesis was beneath discussion, he had excellent ones for pretending to. Trantow, on the other hand, was so outraged by it that he began his "Questions to Kurt Weill" with a veritable fusillade from the high ground of his opening question. Was Weill aware, he asked, of the excitement with which his new opera had been awaited by all who were well-disposed towards the New so long as it was "positive and creative," and did he realize how disappointed they were by a work that was just as "negative and destructive" as *Der Jasager*? For him, the root cause was the thesis itself:

Why do you say "Man does not change, it is circumstances that change his behavior"? Why not: Man changes decisively only in a slow process of development brought about by intellectual perceptions and inner experiences.

Inveighing against the concept of human beings whose convictions are made of rubber, Trantow questions the very existence of "circumstances" in Weill and Neher's sense and goes on to ask whether "at the decisive moment" the authors themselves would be changed by such circumstances. Would they not "carry on in defiance"? As for human beings confronted by the Great Power, are they to learn from the thesis that they are simply victims of circumstance and should therefore acquiesce?

Although the vast shadows that were about to fall across these highly pertinent questions had already in April 1932 been anticipated by 13 million ballots in support of Hitler, Trantow identifies the Great Power only with capitalism; and what he wanted from Weill in August 1932 was not a *Volksoper*, but a *Lehrstück* demonstrating how human beings "would be happier under a system better than capitalism." Trantow returned to

the "*Verhältnisse*" thesis in the October 1932 issue of the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*. Neher, he remarked, was harking back to the late nineteenth-century "milieu theory" in the belief that he had thereby

incorporated the sense of the so-called materialist view of history. But he misunderstands it; moreover, he does so in just the same way as the Vulgar-Marxists who adopt the economic interpretation of history not as a heuristic principle, but as one which translates the materialism of science into social terms.<sup>8</sup>

Had Trantow been more sympathetic to the Brecht-talk of the day he might at this point have preferred to introduce the then-fashionable topic of Watson and Behaviorism; had he come from somewhere in the neighborhood of Georg Kaiser, he would more probably have lighted on Tolstoy and even Henry George. But because his eyes were fixed on the far horizon, his ears were not distracted by the noises around him; and so it happened that, almost alone among his contemporaries, he discovered in this "good and honorable score" the dialectic he had missed in the libretto and the sense that Bekker had closed his mind to:

While the librettist does not rise above his acquiescent pessimism, but instead portrays in a flagrant form the mere existence of our capitalist society in its late stage of imperialist expansion, the composer allows the listener at least a presentiment ... of a new world to come, of the true realm of freedom, as Marx would say.

And not only Marx. If in invisible ink there was a second name on the envelope of Bekker's open letter to Weill, it was surely that of the utopian Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose "Fragen in Weills *Bürgschaft*" is the fourth and finest of the major contemporary contributions to the *Bürgschaft* debate.<sup>9</sup> Bloch would certainly have figured among the "propagandists" decried in the first stages of Bekker's letter; and a few paragraphs later his famous essay of 1930, "Mangel an Opernstoffen" [Dearth of opera subjects], is immediately called to mind by Bekker's reference to nameless critics who overrate the importance of subject-matter. Weill is the one contemporary hero in Bloch's essay; and it is the "subject-matter" of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* that commands his admiration.

8 Herbert Trantow, "Weill: *Die Bürgschaft*," *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 38 (October 1932): 877-79.

9 *Anbruch* 14 (November-December 1932): 207-09. Reprinted in *Über Kurt Weill*, pp. 82-84.

Bloch and Bekker were no strangers to each other. In *Geist der Utopie* (1919), Bloch had been notably uncomplimentary about Bekker in general and his Beethoven book (1911) in particular. No sooner had the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a lengthy and favorable review of *Geist der Utopie* than Bekker, who was then the chief music critic of that paper, replied with an excoriating review of the "Philosophy of Music" which forms the greater part of that historic and eccentric book. In the early 1920s Bloch began to evolve his own unorthodox and unmethodical brand of Marxism, which in certain respects anticipated the so-called Liberation Theology of recent times. One of the three factors that led him to resume writing about music towards the end of the 1920s was his discovery of Weill through *Die Dreigroschenoper*, the second, and connected with that, was his alliance with the much younger and musically more sophisticated Adorno; and the third, thanks to Otto Klemperer, was his involvement with the pioneering Kroll-Oper.

Whether Bloch's "Fragen" were published in a Feuilleton before they appeared in the final 1932 issue of Universal Edition's monthly modern music review, *Anbruch*, is an important detail that would merit investigation for two reasons: first, because proof of earlier publication would increase the likelihood that Bekker knew of the "Fragen" before his "Letter to Weill" went to print, and second, because a previous version would shed some light on a puzzling aspect of the *Anbruch* one. Of all the *Bürgerschaft* commentators, Bloch is the one most likely to have known of the origin and background of the "Verhältnisse" thesis. That Trantow overlooked or ignored it is already surprising; that Bloch said nothing about it is so extraordinary that one wonders whether he decided that it would not be in the best interests of *Die Bürgerschaft* to draw attention to the matter at that hazardous time.

In answer to Trantow's question about the reality and signification of "Verhältnisse" in Weill and Neher's sense, Weill threw in the word "economic" and then fudged the issue with a reference to "what antiquity called 'destiny'." He must surely have known that the true answer would have been "modes of production"; for that is the first subject in a classic (and notorious) Marxian formulation whose dialectical continuation is unmistakably the model for his and Neher's thesis. The passage is from Marx's Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Trantow's humanist objections to the Weill-Neher version were a heightened and emotionally intensified form of reservations that had already been widely voiced in the liberal press – especially in a long and thoughtful article on the libretto which the literary critic Bernhard Diebold had published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 March 1932. (Diebold's *Denkspieler Georg Kaiser*, 1924, had been the first and is still one of the most important studies in that field, and it is clear that his *Bürgschaft* article arose from it.) But the most effective critic of Marx, Weill, and Neher is Marx himself – the young Marx of 1845, in the third of his “Theses on Feuerbach”:

The materialists who maintain that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that changed men are therefore products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forget that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated ... The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.<sup>11</sup>

There was as little reason for the authors of *Die Bürgschaft* to dissent from that argument as there was reason for their audiences blindly to accept a thesis that was half-formed and dialectically inert by any standards. It is even questionable whether, for the purposes of *Die Bürgschaft*, Weill and Neher would have needed to repudiate Engels's strictures about Feuerbach and his view of human relations:

The chief thing for him is not that these purely human relations exist but that they shall be conceived of as the new, true religion ... religion is derived from *religare* and meant originally “a bond.” Therefore, every bond between two men is a religion. Such etymological tricks are the last resort of idealist philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

10 Karl Marx, Preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works in Two Volumes* (Moscow, 1951), 1:329. Originally published as *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin, 1859).

11 Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow, 1946), p. 76.

12 Engels, *ibid.*, p. 39.

Because Weill, for the reasons he gave to Trantow, is consciously and publicly disavowing the idealism towards which his music is invariably drawn, the "bond" between Mattes and Orth had to be flawed from the start and then had to be severed ruthlessly at the very close, where Klemperer's redemptive solution would have reverted to the theocentric certainties of a vanished era. But the "pledge" or the "security" – the "bond" – about which Weill was writing an entire opera was not between two individuals (not even between symbolically-enlarged successors to Jim Mahoney and "Savings-Bank" Bill) but between the individual and the law, the law and the state, the state and its government, the government and the people, the people and the individual.

The bias in Bekker's critique of *Die Bürgschaft* as a "political" opera is manifest above all in the purely formal interest he ascribes to the relationship between the solo voices and the choral forces and his studied lack of interest in the very "politics" which have determined that relationship, as he himself acknowledges. These are not the silences of one who knows too little, but of one who knows too much – whether or not he has already read Bloch on the subject. Unexpectedly, but with strict accuracy, Bloch picks as his outstanding example the Act I river scene. Describing it as a "cantata of fog and distance in which men are on their own and separated from each other," he remarks that besides being didactic, the interjections by the commenting chorus reveal "a certain latent sadness" on the part of "the collective," at its absence from the scene. From that sorrow and others like it, he argues, the marches and choruses of Act III derive their revolutionary militancy. Bloch is presumably referring to the passage where the bass voices in the chorus begin to describe the formation of fog according to a "law of nature": at the point where the basses relate that the airborne moisture from surfaces warmed by the daytime sun have met the evening chill of the lower atmospheric layers, the orchestra introduces a countermelody that is far from nebulous in its relationship to the political *Kampflieder* of the day. Tempting as it may seem in today's climate to dismiss Bloch's reference to the Marxian collective as claptrap, there is nothing fanciful about the bearing which the orchestra's riverside militancy has upon the eventual emergence of the crowd chorus.

Despite his formal preoccupations, Bekker does not mention that the crowd chorus is neither seen nor heard until the arrival of the Commissar, whereupon (in the New Scene) it is heard but not seen, collectively endorsing the words of the Judge. When at last it does emerge – in the

Act II finale – female voices are excluded from it, while the men are passive (as the Judge demands) but unresisting (as the music plainly is not). Only in Act III does the chorus become the collective voice of the protesting populace – initially in the War and Inflation scenes, but crucially in the Hunger scene, where Weill reclaims the modes of expression Eisler had legitimately borrowed from him and developed for his own purposes (compare, for instance, Eisler's well-known "Ballade von den Säk-scheschmeissern" of 1930) and exploits them in the interests of depicting a collective that is neither absent nor incomplete, but already activated – as the commenting chorus confirms at the end of the "Sickness" scene. This is the point at which "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity" might at last be understood as "revolutionizing praxis," in Marx's sense; but the "true realm of freedom," first glimpsed through the fog of the river-scene and still fleetingly indicated to the blinded Mattes by the music that envelops Orth's false promises, is not in the Judge's sense accessible from the trade-routes of violence.

Had *Die Bürgschaft* revealed itself in its final pages as a moral fable about the failure of a proletarian revolution, it would have over-invested its legacy from recent German history, but might still have earned the place that Paul Bekker with genuine good humor had reserved for it in his private opera museum (an admirable institution designed for such "live animals" as Gluck's *Alceste*, Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*, and Busoni's *Doktor Faust*). However, its proper place is not in any building or parkland of that sort, but out in the wilds of the repertory on some high escarpment close to Musorgsky's *Khovanschina*, to cite but one example from Russian opera of a comparably flawed work of genius that commands a rare historical perspective.

But that was not at all the impression left by the solitary and by no means ill-received revival of *Die Bürgschaft* in Berlin in 1957. The garbled version of the work presented on that occasion was based on the reasonable assumption that the Germany of the *Wirtschaftswunder* would be unsympathetic to the notion that "Man does not change" and would prefer not to be reminded of War, Inflation, and Hunger – or of the "circumstances" of 1933 that had so swiftly and effortlessly changed the "behavior" of a nation. Meanwhile, the opposing "realm of freedom" administered by Walter Ulbricht and his S.E.D. had nothing to learn from an opera that depicted among other things a totalitarian and morally bankrupt regime whose characteristic agents were thieves, blackmailers,

and turncoats. Rather, it was surely in the German Democratic Republic in the early months of 1989 that the dialectic of events from the time of Dubcek's Spring of 1956 in Prague to the birth and attempted suppression of Solidarity in the Poland of 1980 brought about a coincidence between changing circumstances and human activity that could be conceived as a (non-violent) revolutionizing praxis; for this was a situation that had become wholly intolerable, a situation, to adapt Lenin's classic definition,

- (1) when it is impossible for the rulers to maintain their rule in an unchanged form; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the rulers, a crisis ... which causes fissures, through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed bursts forth ...; (2) when the want and suffering of the oppressed have become more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activities of the people, who in "peaceful times" allow themselves to be robbed, but who in turbulent times are drawn both by the circumstances of the crisis and by the rulers themselves into independent historical action.<sup>13</sup>

Such was the situation, broadly speaking, in Act II of *Die Bürgschaft*, and such were the perceptions of those who from a moral and intellectual position led the calls for radical change in Eastern Europe in the autumn of 1989. If, in the light of those preliminary events and of their untoward consequences, it becomes easier to recognize that the fifth "door" of *Die Bürgschaft* can in all "turbulent times" and in every socially critical circumstance be opened from either side, then the centralizing thrust of a music which to one listener (Diebold) sounded "frankly sacred," while to another (Trantow) it evoked Marx's "realm of freedom," can be "rationally understood" not as a source of confusion but as a definition of possibilities latent in a more-or-less inscrutable future. Among the few certainties to which *Die Bürgschaft* – not without benefit from the example of Verdi's *Don Carlos* – directly and pertinently bears witness is the ineradicable tendency of Great Powers to dominate, invade, and devour smaller ones. The fate of the land of Urb is writ large in post-colonial history, and the promises of the Commissar bring with them an age-old message of betrayal. Essentially, they are the promises of revolutionary change, of a decisive turn, whether backwards or forwards, but never merely sideways. *Die Bürgschaft* is an opera about two revolu-

13 V. I. Lenin, *The War and the Second International* (London, 1931; rev. ed. 1940; reprinted 1942), p. 11.

tions, not one; but since the immediate and total change accomplished by the Commissar in the name of the Great Power was challenged but not, or not yet, reversed by the second "revolution," it was only in Act II, at the opera's decisive turning-point, that some kind of ultimate truth could be exposed or at least hinted at.

In his reply to Trantow, Weill spoke of a "timeless idea" behind the opera's "human action," but left no clue as to what it might be. Had Trantow concentrated more on the structure of the opera and less on the troublesome "thesis," he might not have overlooked the key passage in the Judge's indictment of the Commissar's revolution. Although anything but positive in the superficial and almost Socialist Realist sense Trantow seems to be postulating, it remains affirmative in a deeper and indeed timeless sense. It is not to Marx or even to Tolstoy that the Judge turns in his critique of what Bloch would have termed the "alienations" and "reifications" of capitalism, but to the Stoic philosopher Seneca (c. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65):

After this affair, money began to be held in honor, and the true honoring of things ceased. Having ourselves become sellers, and venal in turn, we do not ask what is the essence of something, only what it costs.

This, of course, is not the end of the matter, but the center of it. Behind *Die Bürgschaft*, wrote the clairvoyant Bloch, stands "a fourth Act, or better, a new opera." The fourth Act of *Die Bürgschaft* became *Der Silbersee*, and beyond that frozen lake, still invisible and surely unimaginable to the Weill of 1932, lay *Der Weg der Verheißung*, that "Road of Promise" whose origins were the "pledge" of the God of Abraham and Isaac to the people of Israel.

### *Abstract/Abriß*

Nazi critics of *Die Bürgschaft* ignored or were unaware that the source of Herder's parable "*Der afrikanische Rechtsspruch*" is a section of the Talmud dealing with questions of property. They contented themselves with the charge that Herder was fundamentally irrelevant to the work's "Jewish-Marxist" aspirations. Indeed, a careful reading of Weill and Neher's libretto uncovers Jewish roots and Marxist resonances. But these aspects should not overshadow its underlying Tolstoyan ideals and its pointed contemporary political references, in particular Gandhi's ongoing opposition to Britain's colonial system. The ultimate demonstration of Weill's confidence in the power of his music to evince the truth or

*evoke the impalpable lies in the almost unrelieved negativity of the libretto, which rejects virtually every opportunity of indicating that either the individual or the community is capable of acting selflessly, let alone heroically. This, above all, was the problem that in 1932 exercised the minds of most critics and writers who were favorably disposed towards Weill and recognized that Die Bürgschaft was his greatest achievement yet. The critical reactions of Herbert Trantow, Paul Bekker, and Ernst Bloch, together with Weill's published response to Trantow, articulate the issues central to the Bürgschaft debate, as well as the timeless ideas which Weill suggested lay behind the opera's libretto. The opera's "pledge" or "bond" was not between two individuals, but between the individual and the law, the law and the state, the state and its government, the government and the people, the people and the individual.*



Nationalsozialistische Kritiker der Oper „Die Bürgschaft“ ignorierten die Tatsache – oder sie war ihnen unbekannt –, daß Herders Fabel „Der afrikanische Rechtspruch“ seinen Ursprung im Talmud hat. Stattdessen gaben sie sich mit der Feststellung zufrieden, daß Herder für die „jüdisch-marxistische“ Oper völlig irrelevant sei. Tatsächlich aber können durch ein sorgfältiges Studium des Librettos von Weill und Neher die jüdischen Ursprünge und marxistischen Anklänge entdeckt werden. Doch solche Aspekte sollen die der Oper zugrundeliegenden Tolstoischen Ideale nicht mit ihrem pointierten Bezug zu zeitgenössischen politischen Ereignissen verdecken, wie Gandhis fortlaufende Opposition gegen das britische Kolonialsystem. Die anschaulichste Darstellung von Weills Vertrauen in die Macht seiner Musik, die Wahrheit zu zeigen oder das Unfaßbare heraufzubeschwören, liegt in der unversöhnlichen Negativität seines Librettos, in dem jede Möglichkeit selbstlosen Handelns – sei es durch eine Gemeinschaft oder durch ein Individuum – verneint wird. So ergibt sich ein Problem, das 1932 den meisten Kritikern und Schriftstellern, die Weill wohlwollend gegenüberstanden und die „Bürgschaft“ als seine bisher größte Leistung würdigten, durch den Kopf ging. Die zentralen Streitfragen der „Bürgschaft“-Debatte entwickeln sich aus den kritischen Reaktionen Herbert Trantows, Paul Bekkers und Ernst Blochs, parallel zu Weills eigener veröffentlichter Antwort auf Trantow, in der er auf die dem Libretto unterliegenden Grundideen hinweist, die an keine spezielle Zeit gebundenen waren. In dieser Oper steht der Begriff „Bürgschaft“ oder „Bund“ nicht für das Verhältnis zweier Menschen zueinander, sondern für das Verhältnis zwischen Individuum und Gesetz, Gesetz und Staat, dem Staat und seiner Regierung, der Regierung und dem Volk, zwischen dem Volk und der individuellen Persönlichkeit.