

# HAPPY END

KURT WEILL: MUSIC/BERTOLT BRECHT: LYRICS/WITH LOTTE LENYA  
ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS CONDUCTED BY WILHELM BRÜCKNER-RÜGGERBERG  
PRODUCED UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF LOTTE LENYA (SUNG IN GERMAN)

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NOTES ON TEXT AND TRANSLATION ENCLOSED

## UNHAPPY BEGINNING

**Happy End**, Weill and Brecht's second "play with music" has had a strange history. The work was first performed on September 2, 1929 in Berlin with the following billing (the title itself was in English):

### HAPPY END

A magazine story by Dorothy Lane  
German adaptation: Elisabeth Hauptmann  
Songs: Brecht and Weill

This, for the Berliners and especially for the critics, was both provoking and enigmatic. No one could trace either Dorothy Lane or her magazine story. Furthermore, certain coincidences prepared the way for dangerous comparisons. The première of **The Threepenny Opera** had taken place almost exactly a year earlier at the same theatre, under the same producer (Ernst Josef Aufricht) with the same stage directors (Erich Engel and Brecht himself), the same designer (Caspar Neher), the same musical director (Theo Mackeben) and the same orchestra (the Lewis Ruth band). The subject of **Happy End** likewise concerned the doings of the Underworld, and Elisabeth Hauptmann was again announced as being responsible for the adaptation from an English text. The stage seemed set for the appearance of a younger brother of **The Threepenny Opera**.

This was by no means an advantage. Brecht was a big enough talent to have big enemies, and his overnight success with **The Threepenny Opera** was a gift from the gods that many were determined should not be repeated. The general public is more indulgent, and at the première of **Happy End** it applauded vigorously after the first act. During the interval there was general anticipation of a success that would surpass even that of **The Threepenny Opera**. There appeared to be none of that social criticism and angry protest which provoked an undercurrent of nervousness amidst the enthusiasm for the earlier play. Here the gangsters were simply gangsters, and none of the characters seemed especially unhappy, even at the beginning. But the title proved ironic, for at the climax of the third and last act, everything that seemed lighthearted was given a sharp twist to the left, and the play ended with a scene which combined scurrilous political satire with what seemed very like frank blasphemy. There was a minor riot, and the police were called in to restore order.

Next day, the critics descended in their columns with guns blazing left and right. No one had a good word to say for the play. It was dismissed as a feeble attempt to repeat the success of **The Threepenny Opera**, an attempt which began by being merely trivial, and ended by being offensive as well. The radical press expressed no gratitude for the radical ending, and attributed the whole enterprise to the basest motives. But the thing which enraged most of the critics, whatever their political color, was the mysterious Dorothy Lane. This was a ghost in which no one believed, and it provided an ideal occasion for sarcastic speculation. One distinguished critic remarked that "This comedy is so lackadaisical that it can only be the work of Bert Brecht."

However, there was a complication. This was a musical play, but these were drama critics. No matter! A brave drama critic does not desert his post even in the face of music, and on this occasion, everyone was feeling extremely brave. Unlike Brecht, Weill was not the object of any personal animosity. He was simply in the line of fire, and since everyone had agreed that the drama of **Happy End** was a pale imitation of **The Threepenny Opera**, the easiest solution of the musical problem was to say that the score had the same bad character (despite the fact

that the two works do not have a single musical phrase in common, and the musical aims are in every way different).

However, one paper (the "Vossischer Zeitung") had the foresight to send its drama critic and its music critic. And the music critic was none other than Max Marschalk, a close friend and adviser of Mahler, and a man of real musical substance. Next day, the drama critics must have been embarrassed to read Marschalk's notice, which began: "Weill has developed into a Master of the song. He was already that in **The Threepenny Opera**. If anything, he is still more so in **Happy End**." As it turned out, Marschalk's high opinion of **Happy End** was widely endorsed in musical circles, and at least one responsible critic had expressed a personal preference for **Happy End** above all Weill's theatre scores.

Nevertheless, the play could not hope to survive the murderous onslaught of the critics, and it was soon withdrawn. Brecht never acknowledged it as his own, or allowed it to be printed, and the complete score was not published. The memory of the play was kept alive by two or three songs—notably "Surabaya Johnny"—until eventually everyone forgot that there had ever been any other music.

In 1956 Lotte Lenya recorded three of the songs in her famous album, "Berlin Theatre Songs by Kurt Weill." Attention was drawn to the forgotten complete score, and a production of **Happy End**, in a much revised version, was staged in Munich in February 1958. The production was a great success. One critic, intelligently distinguishing the function of the music from that of **The Threepenny Opera** score, remarked that in **Happy End** Weill had pioneered the German musical. History has not yet allowed the pioneer to have any significant followers in that direction, but this is no fault of Weill's.

The Munich success of **Happy End** led to productions in other cities, and then to the publication of the complete score (thirty years after its composition!). Now comes this recording, which is the most important step so far towards the proper appreciation of one of the miniature treasures of the musical theatre: a little work that transcends littleness, a divertissement that is more than merely diverting, a sidetrack that leads somewhere usefully.

## THE BACKGROUND

**Happy End** was the fourth collaboration between Kurt Weill and the great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. The first had been the singspiel **Mahagonny** in May 1927; the second was **The Threepenny Opera** written during the summer of 1928, and the third was the full length opera **The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny**. In May 1929 Brecht and Weill set off for the South of France in their cars, with the intention of working on the song texts of **Happy End**. But Brecht had an accident on the way, and had to return. Work was postponed until July of the same year, and was completed during an August holiday on the Ammersee (Lake) near Munich.

## THE FOREGROUND

There is no doubt that an injustice was done to the **Happy End** play. Although scarcely original, the play is entertaining and well constructed. It is certainly not inferior to many a highly successful matinee-filler. Unfortunately, everyone wanted another **Threepenny Opera** and then, as if ashamed of their greed, pretended they had got it and that it was bad.

The music in **Happy End** has a purpose of its own, quite different from that of **The Threepenny Opera**. Whereas in the earlier work the music is an integral part of the dramatic structure, developing it or commenting on it, the **Happy End** songs are purely decorative. With the exception of the "Matrosen

Song," they are not essential to the development of the play; nor are they expressions of individual psychology. Consequently the decision to have one singer for all the songs in the present recording, apart from the Salvation Army choruses, is perfectly consistent with their essential nature.

Despite all appearances, the music of **Happy End** runs counter to the tradition of incidental music (which Weill opposed all his life). Brecht's texts and Weill's music are quite literally the *raison d'être* for the play. It is here and here alone that the heart beats and the fist is clenched.

In his review of **Happy End**, Max Marschalk rightly pointed to a characteristic strain of melancholy in some of the music, and observed that it is "The mark of a true musician, who will not lose himself in dealing with trifles." This is very true. A lesser artist might have made the obvious slightness of the play an excuse for hasty and ill-considered work. For Weill, it was a labor of love and craftsmanship, and there is not one casual or unfeeling phrase. Although he must have known that the play was of ephemeral significance, he made it the occasion for scrupulously furthering the development of his art. Without implying any adverse comment on the great **Threepenny Opera**, it is worth considering some of the respects in which **Happy End** advances the technical procedures of that work.

In the first place, we note an enrichment of the harmonic vocabulary by new kinds of suspension and chromatic alteration. Typical of this are the rasping sevenths and ninths which open the "Bilbao Song," and the related harmony of the section preceding the refrain in the "Matrosen Song." The lyrical and frankly romantic harmony of "Surabaya Johnny" is another kind of innovation. Melodically all the lines are often broader and blander, making possible the kind of contrast which gives the big C major tune in "The Song of Mandalay" its extraordinary send-off: an example of melodic rocketry if ever there was one.

Contrast is likewise the guiding principle in the consistently lively accompanying textures. Here, the invention of expressive counter-melodies and the integration of melody and accompaniment achieves a greater flexibility with less strict repetition than in **The Threepenny Opera**. In the full version of "Surabaya Johnny," recorded for the first time on this disc, the listener will find that at each return of the verse and refrain, the accompaniment acquires new color and texture, culminating in the last refrain, with the piano's beautifully shaped counter-melody.

Lastly, a word as to the general character of the **Happy End** score. A widespread misunderstanding of Weill's ironic and pathetic methods in other works had led to the impression that his music expresses, however brilliantly, an attitude that is fundamentally cynical. To believe this is to miss the whole point of his art, which is its humanity. In truth, the game of parody has a very minor role in Weill's work. **Happy End** makes a useful introduction to Weill, for the expressive issues are not complicated by any weighty ideological purpose. Max Marschalk rightly discerned a certain melancholy in the music, but it is equally important to notice its frank and appealing gaiety. "The the Hard Nut" is high comedy, and what little parody one finds—notably in the "Song of the Brandy Merchant" and the chorus "In der Jugend gold'nem Schimmer"—is unmistakably affectionate. The object of affection is, of course, the idea of the Salvation Army. The Devil, we know, usually has the best tunes, but Weill does not begrudge a few for the Salvation Army. Although he shows its comic side, he does so with a good conscience and no malice. The more lighthearted of Weill's tunes suggest a lyrical counterpart to Charles Ives' famous song "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven." Dramatically the play seems to stand between Shaw's "Major Barbara" and Frank Loesser's Runyon-inspired "Guys and Dolls."

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