Needles 

Weill's works are heard, and respected, in the Institute for independent judgement. The tag puts an approximate value on the composer, the label describes, in the simplest terms, the kind of artist he is or is thought to be. When a composer's name is better known than all but a few of his works—conventional ideas about the work that do not accord with it are unlikely to be given a fair hearing. Take the case of Schoenberg. Here, reads the present-day label, is a difficult man, the maker of revolutions, the pioneer of atonality, the creator of the twelve-note method. While the early and comparatively conservative works are heard, and respected, in the light of their successors, late or extreme, the earlier, more sophisticated forms, the Preludes, Variations and Four Pieces for the Suite in G, of 1934 are not given their due. They don't sound all that difficult, they certainly aren't 'atonal' or serial. Uncharacteristic by-works? In fact, they're nothing of the kind. But the label covers them and they are seldom performed.

Perhaps the extreme case is that of Weill. No other contemporary composer of comparable 'fame' is so obscured by the labels that have been found for him. Some years ago—it must have been in the early 1950s—I had need of information about Weill, of whose work I knew nothing apart from The Threepenny Opera, which was said to be by far his best piece. Glancing down the list of his works in a reliable musical dictionary, I saw to my amazement the rubric, 'Symphonies'. Was it really true, was it even conceivable, that the composer of The Threepenny Opera had written a symphony? I recalled no mention of it, in the published notices, in Weill's discography. For his death in April 1950. My further enquiries were fruitless.

The first symphony is, as far as we know, Weill's earliest surviving orchestral work (preceding by four years the first such work by his senior contemporary and chief rival, Hindemith). It seems that in this work—begun immediately after his 21st birthday—Weill came of age. That kind of starting-point is one we need to discover before assessing the stature of any creative artist.

For the first time—again, as far as we know—Weill was concerned himself, creatively, with 20th-century man. The symphony is 'about' (in Weill's phrase) the 'sensational' and 'de-code' the second symphony by reference to Weill's other stage works. One could say that this was the composer's part, his way of saying, of his feeling, of his position that is therefore to be heard as a counter-revolutionary manifesto.

Buxom's concept of the 'oneness of music' was not lost on his pupil. Weill believed that the far-from-easy path he had taken was a necessary alternative to the one taken by Schoenberg, whose example, nonetheless, he continued to admire. From the work of Weill, who was born in the first year of our century and died at its mid-point, there emerges for the first time in its most radical form a lesson that has yet to be learnt by those theoreticians and not only the musical ones who would deny that a Britten or a Shostakovich has contributed to the 'historically significant' music of today.