

Weill - Conversation 1

Jo Elsendoorn: Today it hardly seems believable that 15 years ago Europe remembered Weill simply as the composer of 'Die Dreigroschenoper' and two or three American song-hits.

David Drew: And in those days it hardly seemed believable that he had once been considered the most important German theatre-composer since Richard Strauss. If ever a composer's reputation had been systematically demolished, it was Weill's. From 1926 until 1932, major opera houses had vied with each other for the first-performance rights to his new works. After 1933 they were compelled to dismiss him (in the words of a contemporary pundit) as a 'smutty cabaret talent' who would never have been admired or seriously credited with 'creating a style' but for the 'spiritual and intellectual degeneracy' of the Weimar era. Two decades later, no-one, of course, would have used such language. Even so, the general view of Weill – where any view existed – was that whatever talent he had possessed was limited to the field of cabaret theatre.

J.E. Obviously some kind of reassessment was overdue. But there was so much to be reassessed in those years after the war. Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Webern and Berg, Bartok and Hindemith – they had all suffered neglect and abuse during the 1930s.

D.D.: Yes, in that sense Weill had to wait his turn. Meanwhile the revival of interest in his music during the late 1950s owed much to the magnificent work of his widow, Lotte Lenya—with tout whom there would have been no gramophone recordings of Mahagonny, Happy End, Der Jasager, and Die sieben Todsünden. The recordings led to stage productions, and Weill was 'somebody' again. But exactly who he was – what he stood for and where he belonged in musical history – was still unclear.

J.E.: Because he was overshadowed by Brecht?

D.D.: Inevitably. The works that had so far been revived had all been written in collaboration with Brecht; and already by the mid-Fifties Brecht had come to be regarded as one of the major figures in 20th century literature. So it was convenient to view Weill as the junior member of a partnership, and to assume that whatever 'style' he had created was essentially a reflection of Brecht's. It was also convenient, at the height of the Cold War, to present Brecht to Western audiences by way of the works he had written with Weill, since these were, in certain obvious respects, un-Marxist, and since in any case the music possessed certain 'box-office' attractions. But once Brecht had been rescued from the Cold War and established on the basis of his major works – which are those of a committed Marxist – the pieces he had written with Weill were no longer so necessary as a means of 'selling' him to the Western public. Consequently more attention could be given to Weill's contributions to the partnership. As Weill emerged from Brecht's shadow, so, in the mid-Sixties, there began a second phase in the so-called 'Weill renaissance'. Reviewing two newly-published orchestral works in 1968, the late Hans F. Redlich prophesied that they would 'help fortify posterity's verdict on Kurt Weill as one of the few essential forces in the music of this century'.

J.E.: But Weill is widely quoted as saying that he didn't care about posterity – he wrote only for the present. Did he really say that? And if so, did he mean it?

D.D.: He certainly said it; and I'm sure he meant it – at the time. But the time and the circumstances were special. It was 1940, and Weill was watching from his new American home the tragic events in Europe. There's some evidence that deep within himself he'd begun to fear that there might be no posterity. And that's a fear which, for different reasons, few of us today are (or should be?) free from. But it wasn't uppermost in his mind, if indeed he was conscious of it at all. In fact, his remark about posterity was almost identical with something Stravinsky had said shortly before, and in their very different ways, both he and Stravinsky were reacting against Schoenberg, who had often implied the opposite.

J.E.: Weill's way, by then, being Broadway's?

D.D.: Yes; and for a stage-composer who repudiated – as he did, – the elitist

assumptions of much modern art, there was no practicable alternative in America. So from 1940 until his death in 1950 he addressed himself to an audience which expected to be entertained and even edified, but which was indifferent, if not hostile, to the criteria, the traditions, and the future of artistic creation. In order to reach that audience, Weill was forced to sacrifice much that had hitherto been indispensable to him as an artist – and not least his concern about the long-term durability of his work. In 1940 an admirer of his European work remarked that 'Lady in the Dark – his first full-dress Broadway musical – could be described as a masterpiece if someone else had composed it. But in a sense, someone else had composed it. The European Weill and the American are two distinct phenomena, and if we confuse the two, we can't hope to come to terms with either. Although Weill's Broadway work is in some respect much more interesting than is generally supposed today, it neither extends nor illuminates his previous work. What we'll find in the programmes of this year's Holland Festival is the composer Hans Redlich was referring to. That's to say, a composer who cared deeply not only about the present but also about posterity. His representative output exactly spans the 20 years between the two World Wars. Excluding the miscellanea, that amounts to a total of about 40 works (or will do if and when someone finds the six major ones that are still lost).

J.E.: How many of the existing works are worth performing today?

D.D.: In my opinion, almost all.

J.E.: So even if we count every work that's been revived in recent years, the larger part of Weill's European output is still unknown?

D.D.: Yes. And what's more, all the works that have so far become generally familiar were composed between 1928 and 1933. That, I believe, is one reason why these works, despite their popularity, are often misunderstood and therefore seldom well performed and sometimes, I'm sorry to say, simply massacred. One can't fully grasp the significance of what Weill was doing in mid-career unless one has followed his earlier development.

J.E.: That of course is true of most creative artists.

D.D.: But more true of some than of others, and especially true of Weill because sometimes the development was so rapid that it seems arbitrary if one missed the intermediate steps. Moreover, he tended to arrange his works in complementary sets, irrespective of the poet or dramatist he happened to be working with. Each set is defined by certain ideas that are developed from work to work, so that everything is related and interdependent but nothing is duplicated. For instance, 'Mahagonny', which was written with Brecht, leads to 'Die Bürgschaft', which was written with Caspar Neher – and which, incidentally, Redlich and many others (including the composer himself) regarded as the summit of his operatic achievement. 'Die Bürgschaft' in turn leads to 'Der Silbersee', a major musical-drama written with Georg Kaiser.

J.E. : If, as you suggest, one can't obtain a true picture of Weill's work without using a wide-angle lens, how wide should it be? Need the very beginnings be included?

D.D. : Well, not the juvenilia of course, interesting though even they are. But certainly the works Weill wrote between 1918 and 1924 – that is, between his 18th and his 24th birthdays. Apart from Shostakovitch, who was six years his junior, and Britten, who was thirteen years his junior, I can't think of any composer born this century who revealed such striking talent at so early an age. In one respect, the young Weill is unique : he found his true centre at the very moment when music, the arts, and society suddenly seemed to be exploding in all directions. Each of his early works is an attempt to relate that apparently chaotic post-1918 situation to certain ideas of order, whether traditional or new. It's significant that all of them are partly or wholly religious in inspiration, and that in the First Symphony of 1921 a Messianic view is associated with a pacifist and a revolutionary-socialist one. It has been said of Weill's music – in connection with 'Die Bürgschaft' – that it transforms the religious pathos of the 18th century into the social pathos of the 20th. But in fact the social and ethical concerns of his mature work are never completely divorced from the religious awareness which, in his early years, prompted and governed them. The libretto of 'Die Bürgschaft' quotes Marx and Seneca ; but only after the music had quoted the closing 'Domine, Domine' of the Recordare.

J.E. : If that was characteristic of Weill's mature work, it was surely inconsistent with Brecht's outlook.

D.D. : Indeed it was – or at least, with the outlook of the Marxist Brecht. But an expressive and philosophical tension between Weill's music and Brecht's texts is the essence of their unique partnership. And it made artistic sense because there was always an analogous tension within Weill himself. He thrived on contradictions, but would have made a poor Marxist – and a worse priest – because he mistrusted tidy answers and therefore preferred to pose questions, and then question his questions. (No wonder he found Thomas Mann personally and intellectually so congenial in the 1940s!) With his master, Busoni, as with Brecht, he tended to reject with one hand what he accepted with the other. While Busoni accepted and worshipped Bach's music but rejected his God, Weill was seeking the truth about both, and to that extent rejecting his master. With what courage, his 'Recordare' movingly testifies.

David Drew