

Kurt Weill's Symphonies



8.30

THIRD

Two unknown symphonies by Weill? Surely—even his admirers may ask—they cannot be anything more than interesting curiosities? They can be and are. In December 1932, when Weill was at the height of his powers, the Princesse Edmond de Polignac invited him to write a piece for classical orchestra. The result—his second symphony—was first performed in 1934 by Bruno Walter and the Concertgebouw orchestra. 'It's a good piece,' wrote Weill after attending an early rehearsal, 'and the sound is marvellous.' Some may think it more than a good piece. But the currents of the time were against it, and the score remained unpublished until as recently as last year.

The second symphony is in some ways the most eloquent of all Weill's 'dramas.' But Weill insisted that it had no programme, refused to provide the descriptive subtitle requested by Walter, and even pretended that the magnificent funeral march which constitutes its central movement was a mere 'cortège.' Whose was the disaster he lamented here? What was the mortal danger he had composed into the 'marvellous' (which is to say, marvellously lucid) sound and sub-

stance of the opening allegro? Where, and against whom, were the tragi-comic guerrilla forces of the finale being so bravely marshalled? We can still, and perhaps best, be moved by the music without knowing the precise answers to these questions.

In the case of the first symphony (1921), the answers were given by Weill himself on the autograph title page, which (before it was destroyed by well-wishers who hid the score from the Gestapo), bore a pacifist-socialist epigraph taken from Johannes R. Becher's play, *Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers—A People's Awakening to God*. Weill, who was always in some sense but at that time in every sense a religious composer, wrote the work while he was still studying with Busoni. His master advised him to shelve it, which he unwisely did. Whether or not Busoni found the symphony's *Sturm und Drang* aesthetically offensive, he can hardly have been flattered by the obvious musical debt to the Op. 9 Chamber Symphony by his then enemy, Schoenberg. Despite this and other debts—to Mahler, and to Strauss (*Ariadne* and *Tod und Verklärung*)—and despite certain youthful naïveties, it is in many ways a remarkably original and affecting work.

DAVID DREW