

# LETTERS

## To the Editor:

A full year has passed since you published Richard Taruskin's review of *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill*, and I find it curious that something so challenging and, in certain respects, questionable has aroused no public response — not even so much as a word of congratulation to you for commissioning it.

As one of the contributors to *A New Orpheus*, I consider myself disqualified from venturing most of the comments that in principle strike me as no less necessary today than they were a year ago. But there is one area on which some light could perhaps be shed without introducing too many subjective factors.

During his discussion of Weill and the Schoenbergians, Professor Taruskin cites a passage from what he describes as Weill's "wicked little 'classroom lecture' concocted at the request of a Berlin newspaper" and notes that a respectful reference to Brecht is one of the two aspects that may render the lecture "uncongenial to Weill scholars of the new era" — the other aspect being the scorn heaped on it by Schoenberg. This is called in support of Professor Taruskin's contention that the "new era" of Weill criticism has inherited from the old a host of "demons," headed by Brecht and Schoenberg, and that all of them should swiftly be exorcised.

An excerpt from the "wicked little lecture" had already been included by Taruskin and Piero Weiss in their *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* [New York, 1984; pp. 490-91]. Beginning with the words "I have just played you some music by Wagner and his followers," that excerpt — which was not identified as such — ended ten lines later with the words "if music cannot serve the interests of all, its existence is no longer justified" and was quoted from the notes for *Kurt Weill: Dreigroschenoper Selections* [Telefunken Records, LGX66053] — a ten-inch LP disc produced in England in 1955. Weiss and Taruskin follow the anonymous note-writer in remarking that the original source was the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It is clear that the note-writer was relying on a reference to and partial translation from Weill's "lecture" which appeared in *The Musical Times* [1 March 1929; p. 224] and achieved swift notoriety.

What is far from clear is how Weiss and Taruskin could have overlooked the publication in the *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* [vol. 4, no. 1 (June 1980)] of an essay by Alexander Ringer, "Schoenberg, Weill and Epic Theatre," which contained in facsimile the very copy of the original *Berliner Tageblatt* piece that Schoenberg had copiously and

angrily annotated. Professor Ringer had not, however, given the date of publication, which was Christmas Day 1928, nor had he explained that the *Tageblatt* had invited prominent figures from the arts and letters to present themselves and their work in a manner appropriate to a class of intelligent 12-year-olds who read newspapers, interested themselves in topics of the day, and had a keen appetite for facts. Among Weill's fellow contributors were Heinrich Mann, Annette Kolb, Hans Rehfisch, Otto Klemperer, and Alfred Kerr.

To read Weill's contribution complete and in its proper context is, of course, a basic requirement, and one that should obviate some of the misunderstandings bred by the original *Musical Times* quotation and its many successors. The fulfillment of that scholarly obligation does not, however, rescue Weill from some of the charges leveled against him by Schoenberg. It is not the sincerely meant and eminently justified tribute to Brecht that is "uncongenial," Weill's fatal attempt to emulate Brecht's success in manipulating the media in the interest of self-advertisement. If one knew nothing else of his writings and actions throughout the period, one might well conclude from the debacle that the success of *Die Dreigroschenoper* had gone to his head. Attempting a maneuver that Brecht might have devised but surely would never himself have risked, he seeks to win over his young readers by parodying the classroom tyrannies of a Prussian schoolmaster; yet the attitudes he is trying to make fun of merely accentuate the speciousness of his case against Wagner and the shameless salesmanship of his account of Epic Theater in general and *Die Dreigroschenoper* in particular. Unlike Kerr and Klemperer — the two co-contributors to whom he would have felt closest — Weill not only misjudged the tone of the symposium, but also missed the point of it.

Schoenberg, too, may have missed the point; and for quite different reasons, Taruskin certainly has and not only here: with such impressive confidence and verve does he arrange and conduct his set of Mephisto waltzes that no one would believe this to be his first appearance on the platform had he not said so beforehand; and even the motley orchestra of "loyalist" Weillians pretends not to notice that in each number the maestro has begun by firmly grasping the wrong end of the stick.

Many of Taruskin's incidental observations about the role of Weill scholarship in the "new era" are timely and important, but their practical value is in my view greatly diminished by the fanciful device which links them together and

lends them a characteristic élan. Entertaining though it is, his game with the "demons" tends at each move to falsify, confuse, or make light of questions that belong to the real world and demand real answers. The questions that arise from the Brecht collaboration, for instance, begin at a quite humble everyday level but have immense ramifications which cannot, after half a century, be airily brushed aside. Taruskin's faith in the good sense of "musicians" does him credit; but as far as performances of Weill are concerned, it is hard to see the grounds for it.

Such matters are familiar to readers of this newsletter. Altogether more novel and fragile is the Schoenberg question. In Taruskin's account it is epitomized by three quotations — one from Schoenberg himself, one from Webern, and one from Adorno. The Schoenberg and Webern had been quoted for the first time, and juxtaposed without comment, in the leaflet which I edited in 1968 for Bertini's recordings of Weill's two Symphonies. In that form they read as follows:

*Schoenberg (1933) quoted by Virgil Thomson (1967)*

Franz Lehár, yes; Weill, no. His is the only music in the world in which I can find no quality at all.

*Webern [9 March 1942] reported by Dallapiccola [notebook entry]*

Webern, who had said little that evening, suddenly exploded at the mention of Kurt Weill. Pointing his finger at me, he asked me the following question: "Where in Kurt Weill can you find anything of our great Austro-German tradition? Of that tradition," (and here he began to count on his fingers) "expressed by the names of Schubert, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler; Schoenberg, Berg — and Webern?"

Twenty years ago both quotations were in effect brand new: Schoenberg's remark had only recently been published by Virgil Thomson in his autobiography and Webern's had been conveyed to me personally by Dallapiccola prior to the publication in Italy of excerpts from his diaries and notebooks. At that time, and particularly in the context of the recording, both quotations seemed to me to be self-explanatory. Imagine my delight when an anonymous critic in *Der Spiegel* began his review of the recording by pilfering Schoenberg's remark, and continued approximately thus: "Schoenberg perhaps goes too far, and yet..."

Schoenberg's remark to Thomson dates from a meeting in Paris in 1933, when Weill's reputation in that city was

at its height. From my point of view in 1968, it was important because it confirmed and added weight to Walter Goehr's much earlier oral account of how Schoenberg, in one of his Berlin composition classes, had compared the Weill of *Die Dreigroschenoper* to the Lehár of *The Merry Widow*, much to Weill's disadvantage. While Schoenberg's anger with Weill at that time was wholly consistent with his lifelong attitude, and hence predictable even without the provocation of the *Berliner Tageblatt* piece, the fact that he was still expressing it in 1933, and doing so despite the tragic circumstances of that year, has always seemed to me to imply an unconscious recognition that Weill did, after all, amount to something. For that reason among others it has never occurred to me that Weill's standing — whatever that might be — is in any way threatened, let alone damaged, by Schoenberg's contemporaneous view of it. The distance is simply too great: in every musical respect the worlds of Weill and Schoenberg had been musically exclusive since 1928, and in all but the most transient moments had been equally so for the previous six years (notwithstanding Weill's remarks to the contrary apropos of his Violin Concerto — a work in which I, for one, can hear no Schoenberg at all).

Although Webern's explosion of 1942 springs from precisely the same musical

and intellectual background as Schoenberg's a decade earlier, I quoted it for quite different reasons: primarily, because the question he posed was directly relevant to the inherent problems and actual achievements of the two symphonies, and could well be taken word for word as the pretext for a full-scale dissertation on Weill in general; and secondly, because Webern's pre-ordained inclusion of two Jewish masters should not allow us to overlook the fact that the clouds arising from his "explosion" contain some particles of cultural politics that were entirely characteristic of post-*Anschluss* Austria and are not altogether irrelevant to Weill-reception in the German-speaking world since 1945.

For Taruskin's Adorno quotation I must again accept responsibility. But in this case there has been no time for it to become part of Weillian folklore, since my use of it in *A New Orpheus* does not, I believe, have any precedent other than the original publication of Adorno's Weill obituary in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (and not, as I carelessly let slip, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). That obituary, as I observed in my essay and tried to explain, was Adorno's first published attempt to repudiate his pre-1933 view of Weill, but also his last. By selecting the most obviously destructive phrase from my quotation and ignoring not only Adorno's subsequent

atonement for the obituary as a whole — which I discussed in some detail later on — but also the entire body of his pre-1933 writings, Taruskin fathers on a complacent world another illegitimate demon. Certainly Adorno is no angel, either. But his contribution to Weill criticism is unique; and provided it is read with all due caution, it remains indispensable.

Much the same could be said of Taruskin's review, and should be. Once the reader has been alerted to the necessity of rigorously searching for marks of the cloven hoof in every summary of an argument and every gloss on a direct quotation, Taruskin's delinquent demonology can be seen for what it is — a price that has to be paid for his splendid freedom from conventional pieties. As the work of an avowed "outsider to Weill research" who had discovered and demonstrated a lively new interest in the subject, the review had already transcended its ephemeral purpose a year ago. Today it begins to look as if it were as much a part of the "new era" as is *A New Orpheus* itself.

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*Because of the late arrival of Mr. Drew's letter, Mr. Taruskin has been invited to reply in the next issue.*