
Weill's 'Deadly Sins'

by David Drew

Weill composed *The Seven Deadly Sins* in Paris in April-May 1933, shortly after leaving his native Germany (to which he was never to return). It was his last collaboration with Brecht, and was contemporary with his second symphony. The world premiere took place in June 1933 at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, and was a stage production with choreography by Georges Balanchine. The only other production during Weill's and Brecht's lifetime—at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, in 1936—incurred the displeasure of the German Ambassador in Denmark, and on that account was immediately withdrawn. The work's international fame dates from its first revival in the late 1950s.

As listeners, we hardly need to know that *The Seven Deadly Sins* was the result of a ballet commission; and without knowing it, we certainly would never guess. The music is far removed from the Franco-Russian ballet-music tradition, and neither Weill nor Brecht seems to have felt any particular obligation to choreographers or dancers. Words and music form a self-sufficient unity which is so finely composed that even when the orchestra takes over from the voices and provides what might be regarded as a cue for dancing—as in the *saltarello* episode (in 'Sloth') and the quick waltz (in 'Pride')—there is no need for visual elaboration. What we hear is enough for the mind's eye: a highly original synthesis of cantata and orchestral song cycle.

Like its form, the substance and style of the work are unconventional. Constant Lambert, who was one of the few critics to take the work seriously in the 1930s, discussed it—together with works by Weill's friend Darius Milhaud—under the heading 'Symphonic Jazz'. But of jazz, even in the loosest sense of the word (let alone in Milhaud's American-Negro or even Latin-American sense) there is no trace in the greater part of the score. Where there are traces—notably in the 'blues' feeling of the Prologue and the Chaplinesque tragedy-comedy of the orchestral episode in



German State Opera production of 'The Seven Deadly Sins'

'Anger'—the background and middle-ground are unmistakably European. Brecht's text is, of course, studded with American place-names; but these are part of his distancing mythology and sometimes sound like incantations. Although the Auden-Kallman translation (which was made for a New York stage production) adds to, and stresses, the American allusions, we are still left with the musical image of an itinerary somewhere east of the Rhine. Brecht, too, was little concerned with 'American' authenticity; so little, indeed, that he first gave the name 'Adolf' to Anna's Bostonian lover, and then changed it to 'Fernando'—not, one notes, to 'Benito', for there are no politics of that sort in the piece.

The form of the work is symmetrical. Between the Prologue and the Epilogue stand 3+1+3 'Sins', the centre-piece being a male quartet ('Gluttony') which has only a solo guitar for accompaniment. The other numbers are scored for a normal medium-sized orchestra with the addition of harp, piano and banjo (but no saxophones).

Weill's original score, which can be heard on Saturday from the Proms (Radio-4), has not been performed since 1936. In the late 1950s a special edition was made for purely practical purposes; it has remained in use ever since. Apart from some small but not insignificant changes, it involved the downward transposition of all the music for the solo soprano. Consequently the tonal structure of the whole work and the colour of large sections of it were much altered. The 'home' key of Weill's original score—and home, after all, is the text's recurrent image—is C. Firmly established in the number following the exploratory Prologue, C

minor becomes C major at the start of 'Pride'. C major is reaffirmed in the centre-piece, 'Gluttony'; and in C the work, and the tragedy, ends.

Tragedy? Brecht's remarkable text gives few hints of it; and the Auden-Kallman translation skirts even them—including the phrase which begins the final march and in literal translation runs: 'Sister, we are all born free and, as we please, we may walk in the light.' But the motivation of the musical form and its ever-tightening circles is fundamentally tragic, which is to say, contrary to that 'cynical-sentimental' mode that is sometimes supposed to be characteristic of Weill. The superficialities of the work's style and expression are, in themselves, inadequate guides; for on that level the lyrical appeal seems easy-going and the irony or humour may be thought merely entertaining. But the inward and complex nature of both the lyricism and the wit is something that has to be listened for and felt through. What Weill surveys in these latter-day 'songs of a wayfarer', in this urban-industrial *Winterreise*, is not merely the divided heart of the protagonist; it is the sacrifice of an individual (Anna) on the altar of a falsely orientated society (The Family). In learning to subject her own moral and instinctive self to the demands of that society, the Anna who was 'born free' ends in total enslavement. No wonder the 'triumphal' sounds of the final march also convey a sense of outrage; no wonder the 'contented' achievement of the epilogue's absolving C major contains within itself an insufferable discordancy.