

13 *Motifs, tags and related matters*

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Despite notable advances in recent times, the idea of considering Weill's music from other than literary, ideological, or broadly journalistic points of view is still unfamiliar enough for there to be pitfalls in every approach to topics such as the present one. To remark that an understanding of Weill's thematic-motivic processes in any of his European works is inseparable not only from the other formal aspects of the work in question but also from a proper study of those same processes in at least a representative selection of the preceding works is to risk stating the obvious in a context that lends it a spurious air of originality.

Weill's early creative development became decisive for the future at the point where his essentially harmonic intuitions began to be modified by his first apprehension of contrapuntal possibilities. Between 1918 and 1922 – that is, between the inception of the B minor String Quartet and the completion of the *Sinfonia Sacra* (Fantasia, Passacaglia, Hymnus) – he absorbed lessons from his counterpoint teachers (and also from his informal encounters with the polyphonic thinking of Bach, Reger, and Busoni) that were to remain influential throughout his European music, not least, or indeed especially, where the textures are homophonic.

The intensification of Weill's motivic thinking in the works of 1921–23 was seemingly brought about by a fusion between his contrapuntal preoccupations during that period and his discovery through Busoni of Lisztian transformation-processes. The latter were to assume a strictly dramatic significance in his first post-Busoni opera, *Der Protagonist*, where the very concept of 'Verwandlungen' is already fundamental to the drama explicit in the text. *Der Protagonist* is the key work in relation to Weill's methods of dramatic composition and to the critically interesting but practically insignificant question of whether, and if so how far, his methods were deliberate rather than intuitive. In *Der Protagonist* the dissociation of rhythm

from pitch – in one case by means of a relatively complex prose rhythm – and the transformation of intervallic structures by registral and other means achieves foreground effects which are foreign to *Royal Palace* (the intended companion piece for *Der Protagonist*) but not to its successor, *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren*.

It should go without saying that it is the character of any given work rather than its quality that is determined by the relative density of thematic and motivic working. *Der Protagonist*, for example, is motivically much more active and integrated than *Royal Palace*, yet the latter work is in every musical respect the richer and more confident. Whereas in *Royal Palace* the function of companion piece to *Der Protagonist* is fulfilled by way of reversing the compositional as well as the characteristic priorities, in *Der Zar* the same function is fulfilled by ironic variation of the methods of *Der Protagonist*. On the motivic level this process results in a more or less overt parody of *leitmotiv* techniques as presented in the popular opera-guides of yesteryear. Both the dramatic function and the musical effect are in complete contrast to the types of integration characteristic of the next major work, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, in which the underlying structure consistently contradicts the parodistic intentions ascribed to the work by Brecht's celebrated notes on it.

Though first performed long before the completion of the *Mahagonny* opera, *Die Dreigroschenoper* must be heard as one of that work's several consequences, compositionally no less than historically. In the systematic structure of relationships which the *Threepenny Opera* music erects above and across those defined by the libretto, there are three levels, of which the first – the base level so to speak – is one that had no structural function in the two Kaiser operas: tonality. The second level – the idiomatic or characteristic – is dependent upon tonality. The third is the subject of this present survey.¹

The motivic procedures in the *Threepenny Opera* score owe less to Weill's previous experience in non-tonal fields than do those of later and less overtly popular works. With one notable exception, the intervallic content of each motif or tag is defined in terms of a diatonic hierarchy which, like the intervals themselves, remains unchanged at each recurrence.

The present fame of *Die Dreigroschenoper* owes much to the necromantic conjurations of the three-note motif (ex. 1a) with which, after the neo-classical overture, the 'Moritat' singer introduces Macheath; but since the 'Moritat' was apparently the last number Weill composed (which helps explain his subconscious and painfully

ironic memory of the farewell cadences of *Das Lied von der Erde*!), the motif actually derives from, though in effect it prepares for, Macheath's 'Ballade vom angenehmen Leben' (ex. 1b). In Peachum's C major 'Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens', Macheath's identity card is appropriately turned back to front (ex. 1c).

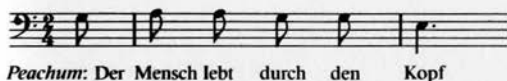
Ex. 1a



Ex. 1b



Ex. 1c



Ex. 1a, b, c: Weill. *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Copyright 1928 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien. Copyright renewed. Copyright assigned to European American Music Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Corporation.

Vertically expressed, the *Moritat*-motif becomes the harmonic *idée fixe* of the entire song – the chord of the added sixth. In its minor form, that chord acquires, during the course of the score, a signalling function so prominent that one may well describe it as the *Dreigroschenoper* chord, if only to distinguish it in principle from the mere mannerism it threatened to become during Weill's first post-German period (up to and including *Knickerbocker Holiday*). At this early stage the influence of his non-tonal procedures is still clearly apparent: in Act I the chord (exx. 2a–c) is identified by its pitch components rather than by its tonal function – a device for which there is an exact precedent in the second act of Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*. In Act II the motto chord is identified by rhythm rather than pitch (exx. 2d–f) – a tango rhythm (R') related, by the elision of one term, to Seeräuberjenny's whispered warnings (ex. 2a) and their explosively *fortissimo* fulfilment at the very close of the Act I finale.

Ex. 2a

Allegretto

pp
Polly: und Sie wis-sen nicht, mit wem Sie re - den

Ex. 2b

(♩ = 92)

fp

Ex. 2c

Più animato

f
Polly: Da be - hält man sei-nen

Ex. 2d

(♩ = 58)

mf
Macheath: So hiel - ten wir, ein

Ex. 2e

(♩ = 96) [Ballade vom angenehmen Leben]

p

Ex. 2f



Ex. 2a, b, c, d, e, f: Weill. *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Copyright 1928 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien. Copyright renewed. Copyright assigned to European American Music Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Corporation.

Whereas the motto chord has no dramatic connotations, its melodic counterpart is entirely concerned with the pretences and realities of Macheath's love life. It is first heard at the start of the Polly-Macheath 'Liebeslied' (see ex. 3).

Ex. 3



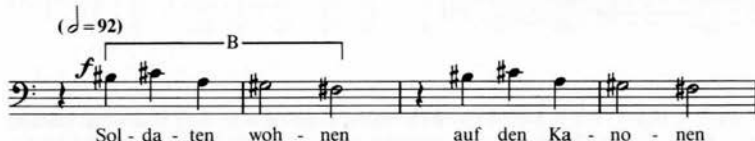
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Since Weill, like Busoni, tended to view the passions of love and war with the same sceptical eye, it is characteristic that the 'love motif' arises from the immediately preceding 'Kanonen-Song'. Its salient feature (A) is a compression of the decisive elements in the 'Kanonen-Song's' introduction (ex. 4a), while its cadential complement (B) echoes the song's 'Soldaten wohnen' refrain (ex. 4b).

Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b

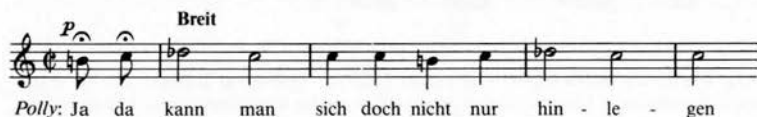


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After the 'Liebeslied', the 'love motif' comes into its own as the basis for the refrain of Polly's 'Barbara-Song' (ex. 5a); and just as the 'Liebeslied' began with it, so does its dramatic counterpart, the 'Pimp's Ballad', end with it (ex. 5b) – at the very point where the policeman hailed by Jenny lays his hand on her lover's shoulder.

In the 'Salomon-Song', Jenny comments on Macheath's downfall as if she, and not Polly, had been the singer of the 'Barbara-Song'. Solomon had been a prey to his own wisdom, and Caesar to his own audacity. And according to Jenny in the 'Salomon-Song' (ex. 5c) the fatal flaw in Macheath (and herself) was passion – *Leidenschaft*. How enviable, she concludes, are those who are free from passion.

Ex. 5a



Ex. 5b



Ex. 5c

Andantino (♩. = 46)

Wie gross und weis' war Sa - lo - mo

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The connotations of 'Leidenschaft' are not necessarily erotic. But thanks to an etymology peculiar to the German language and conveniently amenable to the psychology of German romanticism, the semantics are inseparable from the word's root, which is 'Leid', denoting pain or suffering. The connotations of the Ex.5 nexus certainly include that root, and as far as Weill was concerned harked back to some of his earliest *Lieder*, such as the Eichendorff song of 1916, 'Sehnsucht'.

Macheath's suffering is the wholly serious subject of the two numbers which follow the 'Salomon-Song' – the 'Ruf aus der Gruft' and the 'Epistel'. Weill's superb setting of the 'Epistel' culminates in a furiously denunciatory passage whose melodic and harmonic constituents recall the principal motive of his first 'revolutionary' work, the 1921 symphony. Macheath is no longer the engaging rogue of the previous scenes, indeed, is no longer Macheath. He has become a tragic figure who speaks with the voice of all whom the world, justly or unjustly, has condemned. It is a voice that cries for vengeance as loudly as for forgiveness.

So frank an exposure of the work's inner seriousness at so late a stage created a structural problem which Brecht solved by parodying the conventional happy end (an idea borrowed from Gay but more closely related in satirical function to the epilogue of F. W. Murnau's famous film *The Last Laugh*). Although it was essentially a literary device, Weill might have been able to adapt it to his musical purposes had he not already ensured that his settings of Macheath's two valedictions were the culmination of every serious element he had previously introduced. His conception of the finale could therefore be related to Brecht's only in the sense that it was complementary to it. 'The last finale', he wrote, 'is in no way a parody. Rather, the idea of opera was directly exploited as a means of resolving a conflict and thus shaping the action.'²

A lively chorus in 6/8 time introduces the Riding Messenger (Tiger

Brown) and his *recitativo* proclamation of the Queen's pardon. Musically, Macheath's response to the good news ignores the deliberate bathos of words and situation, for its hypothesis is still the authentic anguish of the previous scene. Weill was not exaggerating when he claimed for the finale a relationship to opera in its 'purest, most pristine form'.³ Macheath begins his lyrical yet inwardly troubled C minor arietta as if he were Mozart's Belmonte and the Queen were Selim. And what of Polly, Macheath's Constanza? Her conclusion to the arietta is a Weillian masterstroke (see ex. 6).

Ex. 6

Allegro molto

Polly: Ich bin sehr glücklich.

Barbara-Song

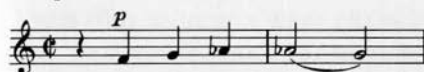
molto rit.

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Polly may consider herself 'fortunate' (*glücklich*); for her darling Macheath is indeed 'saved'. But the orchestral coda with its quotation from the 'Barbara-Song' belongs, like Macheath, to Jenny as much as to Polly. Moreover, the setting of Polly's 'Ich bin sehr glücklich' is an exact transposition of the phrase with which Macheath, in the 'Zuhälterballade', had remarked upon the plurality of amorous relationships and the irrelevance of wedding rings (see ex. 7).

Ex. 7

(♩ = 58)



Macheath: Es geht auch an - ders

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So much for the illusory happy end. But the Peachums have still to make their grimly realistic comment. The anapaestic rhythm of the ensuing C minor *Allegro moderato* echoes that of Macheath's 'Ruf aus der Gruft' and Polly's 'Seeräuberjenny', while the continued commitment to the minor mode reinforces the idea that in truth nobody has been saved – for the world remains poor and man remains evil. It seems as if the furious fatalism of the Act I finale is about to re-emerge as the parting message of the whole work. But a sudden burst of dominant-seventh harmony – rare in *Die Dreigroschenoper* – announces the confident C major of the chorale. Apparently the tension has been resolved just as had been promised in the Overture – which began in a C minor resembling that of Peachum's final warnings, but ended cheerfully in the tonic major. However, the chorale moves away from C major, and its return path is blocked by the minor chord on the dominant – an inhibitory harmony characteristic of Weill's tonal thinking since his first discovery of Mozart. The chorale, like Jenny's C major 'Salomon-Song', closes in the subdominant.

About half the numbers in *The Threepenny Opera* are tonally open-ended. Within the Lutheran tradition from which the *Threepenny Opera* chorale descends, tonal concentricity is naturally identified with theocentricity. Weill's agnostic rather than atheistic chorale proceeds accordingly: while the loss of its tonal centre corresponds to the loss of the absolute faith implicit in its traditional models, the very choice of model still conveys some sense of continuity. 'Rob not the poor, neither oppress the afflicted', says the Book of Proverbs, and in effect the *Threepenny Opera* chorale says the same. The difference lies in the corollary. While Proverbs maintains that 'the Lord' will 'plead the cause' of the poor and afflicted, and will 'despoil those that despoil them', Brecht postulates a natural rather than a divine order by proclaiming that in the dark and cold 'vale of tribulation' injustice will freeze to death of its own accord.

Although the chorale is tonally inconclusive just as the drama is ideologically inconclusive, it does not leave the impression that anything remains to be said within the work's terms of reference.⁴ So far from being a mere epilogue to the score, the melody is a synthesis of disparate elements. Like the finale as a whole, it 'resolves a conflict'.

Busoni had been a lifelong devotee of Bach's chorale-preludes, and had doubtless shown his pupils that many of the old Lutheran melodies derived from popular and secular songs. In that respect, Weill's chorale-melody is a *tour de force*. No fewer than six of the *Threepenny Opera* songs have contributed to it (exx. 8a–g). For convenient reference, the parent-phrases in example 8 have, where necessary, been transposed to the tonally appropriate pitch.

Ex. 8a

Moderato (♩ = 85) C

P *Peachum*: Denn für die-ses Le - ben ist der Mensch nicht schlau ge - nug

Ex. 8b

C⁺

Ihr saht den wei - sen Sa - lo - mo

Ex. 8c

(♩ = 58) D

Macheath: Ich schüt - zte Sie und sie er - nähr - te mich

Ex. 8d

Andante quasi largo E

Mrs Peachum: Da ist nun ei - ner schon der Sa - tan sel - ber

Ex. 8e

(♩ = 58)

Macheath: le - bten wir schon zu - sam - men, sie und ich

Ex. 8f

Molto agitato (♩ = 66)

Macheath: Mac - heath liegt hier nicht un - ter'm Ha - ge - dorn

Ex. 8g

(♩ = 40)

f Ver - folgt das Un - recht nicht zu sehr, in Bäl -
de er - friert es schon von selbst, denn es ist kalt.
Be - denkt das Dun - kel und die gro - sse käl -
te in die - sem Ta - le das von Jam - mer schallt.

Ex. 8a, b, c, d, e, f, g: Weill. *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Copyright 1928 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien. Copyright renewed. Copyright assigned to European American Music Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Corporation.

Despite its tonally interrogative close, the chorale creates the effect of a homecoming. The 6/4 metre and, in more general terms, the orchestral counter-figure, hark back to the chorale-like arrangement of the folk tune with which Peachum begins the first act. It is the only tune Weill has borrowed from *The Beggar's Opera* (where it is introduced by the same character at the same point). A beginning which suggests that the score is merely to be a modern arrangement of the original airs seems no more than a playful trick in the light of the subsequent numbers; yet the tension it creates is in the end shown to be functional. Peachum's 'Morgenchoral' opens a classical gateway which remains open until the final chorale closes it. Thus the intervening explorations of nineteenth and twentieth-century idioms are delimited by the classicism they themselves ignore.

The closing chorale underlines the meaning of the text 'clearly and intelligibly' while solving the musical problem posed by the dynamics of the entire score: the problem, that is, of how to formulate a structurally binding conclusion to a score in which the digressive tendencies have not yet been overcome by the incursive motivicism. A chorale-type statement was uniquely capable of fulfilling the requirements. In a general historical sense it harmonized with the popular conventions of the score and yet in a musical sense it allowed for a more thorough motivicism than they did. Weill's chorale is not only an inspired induction from the foregoing material, but also a masterly demonstration of the truth in Schoenberg's axiom that 'style arises spontaneously out of the exigencies of form'.

In the *Threepenny Opera*, as in *Happy End*, every number, however small, is a memorable and indeed inspired composition. But what distinguishes the *Threepenny Opera* score from its successor are the interacting relationships and tensions that combine to create a music-dramatic form. It is the total form, and not the quality of the individual numbers, that ultimately raises the score to the level of a minor masterpiece.

Demonstrably, the score is not the *chef d'oeuvre* it was once mistaken for. Heard with the right ears, it cannot even be mistaken for a representative work by a light-weight composer. It has all the marks of an inspired occasional piece by a substantial composer who is necessarily holding his main forces in reserve. Already in 1928, Weill's more perceptive admirers welcomed it as such and looked forward to the major works which they rightly felt were sure to follow.