

### **Kurt Weill – Berliner Requiem. Notes on a reconstruction**

Das Berliner Requiem was first performed in Frankfurt-am-Main. In a radio studio. In 1929. In the composer's presence.

Its second performance was in London. In a radio studio. In 1965. The composer had been dead for fifteen years.

The paradoxes and anomalies that are woven into the fabric of Das Berliner Requiem are also inscribed in its history – from the very beginning until Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. The liberal-democratic Weimar constitution of 1920 had abolished the old Prussian censorship; but censorship was soon imposed on the 'new' media of film and radio. One of the taboo subjects was German rearmament, which began in secret after Germany's belated admission to the League of Nations. It had already been exposed (in *Die Weltbühne* and elsewhere) by 1928 – the tenth anniversary of the Armistice.

As composed in November of that year, Weill's 'Kleine Kantate' culminated in a Goyaesque war-trip-tych – the two 'Reports on the unknown soldier under the triumphal arch', and the vehemently anti-militarist marching song 'Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen'. With support from political and religious pressure-groups outside the radio system, several members of 'watch committees' overseeing Frankfurter Sender (and other stations) took strong exception to the texts in general and 'Potsdam' in particular – so strong, indeed, that the already-announced premiere had to be postponed while the haggling continued. The premiere finally took place on 22. Mai 1929. The price for preserving the two 'Reports' – and other 'objectionable' material – was high: the total elimination of the 'Potsdam' march. Even so, Frankfurt was the only station to broadcast the Requiem.

In his introductory note for *Der deutsche Rundfunk* Weill mentions, but does not specify, the activities of 'a few particularly rigorous censors at the radio station' and deplors them. 'About the strange events behind the scenes' he continues, 'maybe there will be more to say later on'. Yes indeed. Sixty years later.

Thanks to the researches of Nils Grosch and other Weill scholars, the 'events' are now relatively clear, at least as far as the Potsdam number is concerned. That, however, was only one of the factors that led the present writer to reconsider the version he had edited for performance and publication in 1965–1967. After many performances in Europe and the USA and several commercial recordings, the edition had acquired an unforeseen and unwarranted status.

With a view to the Weill centenary in 2000, the present writer prepared two new versions, identical in form but differing in other respects. The version first performed at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 2000 called for three men's voices but no chorus, whereas the present (Lucerne) version requires a male chorus as well as the tenor and baritone soloists. For 'Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen' the cho-

rus is crucial. Although Weill's original version for his three singers and wind band is lost (and was probably destroyed), his arrangement for unaccompanied male voice choir has fortunately survived. In the Lucerne version of the Requiem, the protest of the Potsdam chorus counterbalances the apparent passivity of the 'Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen', and reinterprets the 'Ruhe sanft!' for Rosa Luxemburg.

Both versions of the Requiem reject the alpha-and-omega symmetry of the 1965 reconstruction, and expose the torso-like reality of a score that had been progressively dismantled by the composer after he had 'finished' and submitted it in December 1928. The formal problem is inseparable from the philosophical one. For instance: it is only in terms of dogmatic atheism that the finality of the Grosser Dankchoral can be proven. The music itself disproves it (and so would Pascal). Among the most revealing of the composer's afterthoughts was his idea of beginning the Requiem with the Dankchoral.

In truth, the Requiem never had a beginning, nor even a false start. A few days before the Frankfurt premiere, Weill sensibly removed the first number: his 1927 setting of Brecht's 'Vom Tod im Wald', a self-standing piece, stylistically and otherwise wholly incompatible with the cantata proper.

Brecht remembered nothing of the Requiem when Lotte Lenya spoke to him about it in 1955 and sang 'Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen' for him. The poem ranges from Shakespeare's Ophelia to Rimbaud's Les Illuminations without thought of Christian redemption. God is oblivious; decay and renewal are circular.

The 'Ballade' for chorus and guitar only is the first number we hear in this recording. It is not 'the beginning'. In the beginning is – silence.

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[Postscript] An experiment: the number that follows 'Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen' has two alternative single-stanza texts, 'Marterl' and 'Grabschrift' – the one private and personal, the other public and political; in this recording, as in the Lucerne concert of August 2006, the two stanzas are performed consecutively.